



The Sociology of Consumption

A Global Perspective

JOEL STILLERMAN

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The Sociology of Consumption

A Global Approach

Joel Stillerman

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1

Introduction

Pop singer Beyoncé Knowles was the headline act during the Super Bowl 2013 half-time show. This event illustrates several dimensions of contemporary consumption explored in this book. The Super Bowl has the largest audience of any televised program in the United States, fans engage in many rituals while viewing the game, and Super Bowl advertisements set industry trends for the upcoming year. The game tells us something about contemporary American culture, our habits of consuming food and media, and what many of us think is important, since millions of us tune in. It also illustrates group identities and their expression, as fans wear their favorite team's jerseys and build replicas of the football stadium with sandwiches and potato chips. Additionally, men and women have different viewing habits and watch with different levels of attention. Finally, the Super Bowl is one of the few rituals (shared, meaningful activities) in which a large cross-section of Americans participate.

In 2013, advertisers paid approximately \$4 million dollars per 30-second spot with the hopes that their humorous or eye-catching ads would secure brand loyalty among the diverse age, gender, income, and ethnic/racial groups that view this event (Konrad 2013). The ads reflect and influence our ideas and behaviors in relation to work, leisure, money, gender, sex, race, and everyday life.

The half-time show often features established performers that commercial sponsors (Pepsi this year) hope will appeal to a broad range of viewers and persuade them to increase their purchases of the sponsor's product. This year, Beyoncé had a small problem, as she had been caught "lip-syncing" "The Star-Spangled Banner" during President Barack Obama's inauguration into his second term just weeks before (Moody 2013). Hence, many journalists, bloggers, and observers believed Beyoncé had to give a superb performance in order to "rescue" her career. Like other half-time shows, Beyoncé's performance included a massive light show and highly stylized dancing with female performers sporting sexually provocative clothing.

Apart from the usual ingredients, the Beyoncé show made some interesting implicit comments about gender and race. The fact that the band is all female visibly contrasts with women's traditional roles in pop music as singers rather than instrumentalists in a male-dominated profession (Milestone and Meyer 2012). Further, Beyoncé is part of a long tradition of music and dance cultivated within the black community. At the same time, being an entertainer is one of the few occupations relegated to African Americans by a dominant white majority (Jones 1963; Dyer 2009).

This event contains many of the ingredients of our complex and dynamic consumer society. Nonetheless, it is only a small piece of the puzzle. This once-a-year, turbo-charged spectacle has little to do with our daily consumption. To study consumption is to address its spectacular forms, like the Super Bowl or purchases of luxury goods, as well as its mundane, everyday

forms – eating, grocery shopping, buying clothing, and visiting the gas station. Further, the Super Bowl is meaningful primarily for Americans, though it may be viewed in other countries. To what extent does the “larger than life,” “bigger is always better” model of consumption symbolized by the Super Bowl reflect the consumer behavior of most Americans, and how is it similar to or different from consumption in other countries?

This book seeks to understand the fast-changing world of consumption – the desire for, purchase, use, display, sharing, exchange, and disposal of products and services. Other general works offer valuable insights on this phenomenon, and I will build on their ideas throughout this book (see Slater 1997; Lury 2011; Lee 2000; Schor and Holt 2000; Sassatelli 2007; Smart 2010). However, this book is different from these works in three important ways. This book focuses on global consumption, consumption and inequality, and consumer citizenship.

General discussions focus on consumers in the United States and Europe; but today, some of the most important areas of expansion of consumption are outside the Global North (the U.S. and Europe) in the regions we now call the Global South (Parker 2009). These are non-European societies, many of which were colonized by European powers or financially dependent on the U.S., but whose wealth has expanded in recent decades. The economically most important of these countries are the so-called BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, and China), though these changes are present in many countries throughout the world. Having studied consumption in the South American country of Chile since the late 1990s, I am acutely aware of how models of consumption exported from the Global North affect countries of the Global South, but also how countries in the Global South have distinct patterns of consumption that reflect their different histories, cultures, and societies. Since Europe and the U.S. only represent a small percentage of the world’s population, an analysis of consumption must take into account patterns in the Global South.

However, this book will also explore cross-national and cross-regional variations in consumption and its meanings that call for finer distinctions than the broad division between “North” and “South,” take into account the difficulty of classifying some countries as belonging to the North or South (like South Korea, a former colony that developed rapidly in recent decades and is now considered a wealthy country), and examine the mutual influences and exchanges of consumer styles across countries and regions. Some examples of these exchanges include the popularity of Japanese cartoons among teens in many countries or the emergence of “crossover” celebrities like Shakira. This Colombian singer has become a global superstar, having appeared on the U.S. reality television show *The Voice* and performed the theme songs for World Cup soccer championships in South Africa and Brazil.

Additionally, many scholars argue that since the 1970s, we have been experiencing the phenomenon known as globalization – intensified economic, social, cultural, and political contact across national and regional borders. In reality, globalization is a very old phenomenon, dating back at least to the Asian empires of the Middle Ages (Abu-Lughod 1991). However, the process of contact and influence across borders has accelerated and intensified over recent decades due to changes in technology, market competition, the organization of capitalist firms, public policies, and international migration (Harvey 1990).

Therefore, we need to understand not only how consumption varies across countries, but also how the diffusion of consumer goods and lifestyles across borders affects receiving societies. One obvious example of this pattern is the spread of U.S. pop music and media companies. In Latin America, U.S. media channels and Hollywood films have made major inroads in domestic music and film markets in recent years (García Canclini 2001). However, the main source of visual entertainment around the world is national broadcast television. Indeed, soap operas (*telenovelas*), news, and variety programs produced in the region are more popular than foreign programs (Straubhaar 2007: 7). We need to look at variations in consumption across the world, as well as the mutual influences of consumption patterns between countries.

Another distinctive feature of this book is its focus on inequality. Many discussions of consumption implicitly assume that all consumers are white, middle class, and residents of the Global North. However, this assumption ignores how social inequalities based on class, race, gender, sexuality, and age differentiate consumers (Zukin 2004; Bourdieu 1984; Gill 2009); how individuals use consumption as a way to signal their difference from consumers with different backgrounds (Schor 1998); and how ideas about inequality inform consumer choices and consumption-based identities (Milestone and Meyer 2012; Crockett 2008; Goldman and Papsion 2000). Hence, consumption reflects an individual's social position (e.g., their gender or race), but individuals also use consumption as a way to achieve social status in relation to other groups.

Scholars have examined how consumption interacts with class differences (Bourdieu 1984), and many researchers acknowledge that consumption has often been conceived as a feminine activity (Milestone and Meyer 2012). However, scholars have paid less attention to race, sexuality, and age as bases of differentiation between consumers. Yet we need to look carefully at these differences to avoid the mistake of assuming that most individuals buy and use products and services in roughly the same way, or that all individuals have the same capacity to access valued goods and experiences.

Finally, this book differs from general accounts of consumption through its focus on consumer citizenship. We often think of consumption as promoting political apathy or as a politically neutral activity (Adorno and Horkheimer 2000). This perspective overlooks the fact that governments promote and manage consumption by subsidizing (artificially reducing the price of) “essential” goods (gasoline and corn are two obvious examples in the U.S.), providing tax incentives to citizens for the purchase of certain goods (allowing homeowners to deduct mortgage interest from their taxes, hence promoting homeownership), and setting the rules for managing the money and credit supply that may promote purchases and/or specific industries (Zukin 2004; Cohen 2003; Manning 2000). These government policies are part of an implicit bargain between elected officials and citizens – the government will make specific goods available in exchange for political support (or at least compliance).

When governments cannot fulfill their part of the bargain (e.g., when gas prices spike or when there are shortages of essential goods), citizens blame individual officials or the government as a whole. For example, it is widely believed that U.S. President Jimmy Carter (1976–80) did not win re-election in part because of price inflation linked to the 1979 increase in the cost of

gasoline. (In fact, oil producers based mainly in the Middle East had generated the gas price increase by reducing fuel supplies; President Carter had little to no influence on oil prices.) Similarly, many scholars argue that the Soviet Union and its satellite states collapsed in 1989–91 in part because of consumer goods shortages (and the visible example of consumer plenty in Western Europe) (Chirot 1990). Citizens thus expect their rulers to promote and safeguard a socially acceptable level of consumption.

Consumption is also a medium through which citizens demand respect for their rights and those of other groups. In the early 1900s, trade unions promoted boycotts of companies with anti-union policies to pressure them to negotiate. In a better-known example, during the 1950s and 1960s, African American college students staged “sit-ins” at Woolworths lunch counters to demand their rights to consume alongside their white counterparts. This tactic was one of many that helped crush Jim Crow, the legal segregation system of the U.S. South. Similarly, during the 1970s under the leadership of Mexican-American activist Cesar Chavez, the United Farm Workers Union promoted grape boycotts to pressure California landowners to recognize the union (Gabriel and Lang 2006; Cohen 2003; McAdam 1982; Morris 1981).

In the contemporary era of globalization, the arena of citizenship has expanded so that individuals around the world may mobilize and/or consume in ways they hope satisfy their ethical and political goals. One type of activism is an extension of the traditional boycott extended to the international arena. For example, during the 1980s, college students pushed their universities to divest (to withdraw their investments) from South Africa, which at the time was considered the most racist government in the world. The divestment campaign was a major factor leading to the fall of the apartheid regime (Gabriel and Lang 2006).

More recently, members of United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) have attempted to gain greater control over the conditions under which athletic apparel for their universities’ sports teams is produced. Growing awareness that global brands like Nike and Reebok subcontract production of their clothes to “sweatshops” (employing women and children under hazardous conditions), in Asia and Latin America, led students to pressure their universities to review their licensing contracts (whereby universities receive funds from companies in exchange for exclusive use of their goods for sports teams). Students created organizations to review the working conditions in factories contracted to fill their universities’ orders (Klein 2010).

A third arena of consumer citizenship is what many scholars call “ethical consumption.” Here, individuals seek to purchase goods that have been produced under ethical conditions or in ways that are not damaging to the environment. Increasing awareness of the prevalence of sweatshops, poor wages for food producers (like coffee-bean pickers), and the environmental damage caused by industrial food production have led an important segment of consumers to purchase ethically certified and environmentally friendly products. Their choices have led large producers and retailers to stock environmentally friendly lines of goods in addition to their traditional brands and products (Micheletti 2003; Barnett et al. 2011).

Ethical consumption may also involve purchasing specific goods whose producers donate a portion of their proceeds to a charity. This can range from companies that develop agreements

with charities (like the Susan Komen campaign for breast cancer research), as well as full-scale events devoted to charitable causes, like the “Brand Aid” concerts. Scholars question the effectiveness of ethical consumption in that it may be a poor substitute for volunteer work or political activism directed toward achieving the charitable goals promoted by the companies involved, it has not led to major governmental or inter-governmental legal regulation, and it may also bolster the image of companies engaged in unethical activities toward employees or the environment (Jaffee 2012; Smart 2010).

Understanding Consumption: An Initial Overview

Before outlining how I explore each of these issues in the text, I will first briefly note some of the key ways scholars have understood consumption. While the use of objects to satisfy biological needs and to construct meaningful lives is a cultural universal (Sassatelli 2007; Douglas and Isherwood 1996; Lury 2011), this book focuses on modern consumption, which is largely (though not exclusively) based on the purchase of goods and services on the market.

In addition to the acquisition of goods through market exchange, modern consumption occurs in societies where individuals and groups shape their identities in relation to goods. As we explore in [chapter 2](#), scholars disagree about when such a society emerged. Traditionally, economic historians focused on the Industrial Revolution in eighteenth-century England as ushering in the modern era. However, recent scholarship challenges this view, arguing that a consumer or commercial revolution coincided with and may have precipitated the Industrial Revolution (McKendrick et al. 1982). Others suggest that there were precedents for the eighteenth-century consumer boom in the Middle Ages (Sombart 1967), the European Renaissance (Mukerji 1983), sixteenth-century England (McCracken 1988), and seventeenth-century Holland (De Vries 1975, 1993).

Many of our ideas regarding modern consumption began in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with economists’ efforts to define the new identity of the “consumer.” Classical economics argued that consumers are rational actors seeking the best price for a given product. According to this view, the combined actions of consumers ultimately determine the prices of goods, and hence shape and discipline markets. However, this view ignores the fact that desire rather than calculation motivates much of consumption, gift-giving does not necessarily satisfy personal needs or desires, and advertisers often influence consumers’ choices. The view of the consumer as an isolated, rational individual ignores the fact that non-rational motives and social influences shape consumption (Slater 1997; Smart 2010; Campbell 2005; Sassatelli 2007). Further, Trentmann (2006a) suggests that the British began to view themselves as consumers in the nineteenth century primarily due to political struggles, the law, and warfare. Consumer identities emerged differently elsewhere: in Germany, individuals were politically mobilized as members of interest or class groups like “workers” or “women” rather than as individual consumers. In sum, modern consumption did not necessarily coincide with people’s identification of themselves as consumers, a process that varied across time and space.

Karl Marx (1967) disagreed with classical economists who argued that supply and demand

shaped modern economies. He argued that employers' exploitation of workers in *production* generated profits, in contrast to economists' view that profits resulted from *market exchange*. He contended that while we assume that a good's price reflects its value in relation to other goods, this assumption is mistaken because it ignores the labor needed to produce that product and the fact that business owners earn profits by paying workers less than the value of the goods they produce. Marx called this confusion *commodity fetishism*, which he understood as a type of superstition. He argued that this superstition hides the true source of profits in employers' exploitation of workers.

Marx (1978a) developed the related concept of ideology or the dominant "worldview" present in a given society. He argued that during every historical era, the dominant class develops a worldview that justifies its rule to the rest of society. In the contemporary United States, one example of ideology is the American Dream – the idea that any hard-working individual can become wealthy. Following Marx, the idea that each individual has an equal opportunity to become wealthy makes capitalism seem like a just system, while hiding the fact that the wealthy minority control the resources, connections, and political influence that maintain their dominance and make "rags to riches" upward mobility unlikely for most individuals.

Additionally, Marx (1978b) argues that production and consumption are mutually dependent. Production is also a form of consumption: factories use raw materials and machinery wears out, and workers use up their energy but also develop their skills at work. Similarly, consumption is also a form of production: consumers satisfy their biological needs and produce their identities through consumption. Moreover, producers provide consumers with specific goods that shape and at times create their needs, like the contemporary need for a cellular phone, which was not perceived as a "need" a few decades ago. However, a product only exists as such if it is used. The consumer makes it a product by using it: a dress takes the form of a product only after a person wears it. Finally, when individuals consume a product, they generate demand for additional production.

These three ideas are important to later criticisms of consumer society, particularly the idea that advertisers can convince consumers that a particular car, article of clothing, or lipstick will magically transform its owner (Jhally 1990; Haug 1986). Further, commodity fetishism hides the "dirty little secret" of capitalism: we see the attractive Nike athletic shoe but are unaware of the deplorable conditions under which children in a Vietnamese sweatshop work to produce it (Klein 2010; Smart 2010).

Several authors argue that production shapes consumption and that the advertising and entertainment industry persuade consumers that products will enhance their lives in ways that transcend their physical properties. Adorno and Horkheimer (2000) argue that producers and advertisers create false needs for new goods or services and manipulate consumers into buying these goods. Products provide individuals with momentary but ultimately unsatisfying pleasures, leading them to accept their exploitation under capitalism: consumption becomes an ideological system.

Further, commercial culture erodes individuals' interest in high culture, and hence leads to a declining audience for genuine artistic expression. Slater (1997) dates this concern back to the

early modern era when members of the nobility feared they would lose their monopoly over luxury goods and hence criticized the decline of culture resulting from the majority of the population gaining access to luxury goods (for related arguments, see Galbraith 2000; Haug 1986; Smart 2010). Baudrillard (1996, 2000) takes this argument further, contending that modern advertising takes control of modern culture so that there is no way for individuals to see beyond the frontier of advertising and media.

Another critical perspective on consumption draws on the work of Max Weber (1958), who argued that ideas and subjective attitudes encouraged the rise of modern capitalism. This view contrasts with Marx's emphasis on property ownership and employers' extraction of profits from workers. Weber argued that the religious Reformation in Europe ushered in new ideas and habits that indirectly influenced the rise of capitalism. Specifically, the Calvinist doctrine that urged believers to work hard in a calling and save money rather than enjoying worldly goods had the effect of encouraging individuals to work, invest their savings, and evaluate their actions through rational analysis, all values necessary for operating a modern business. He argued that even after Calvinist and other Protestant doctrines lost influence, the ascetic values promoted by Calvinism remained. In his related work on bureaucracy (1946a), he argued that modern businesses and governments were much more efficient than family firms because of their hierarchy, division of labor, and clear rules. Like the Calvinist worldview, modern organizations encourage rational, efficient action, but also discourage emotional and creative expression, making them cold and heartless.

These two ideas have importantly influenced analyses of modern consumption. Campbell (2005) models his book after Weber's *Protestant Ethic*, but he departs from Weber's notion that modern businessmen lived ascetic lives and consumed little. Rather, he posits that a romantic ethic developed from several breakaway Calvinist sects in Great Britain. These sects rejected the idea of predestination and argued that individuals could display their redemption in God's eyes through both "conduct and character." Expression of character could come through emotional displays of pity and empathy with others. The sects promoted emotional expression and suggested that pleasure could be gained through experiencing emotion. Later, in the eighteenth century, middle-class and aristocratic women became avid consumers of gothic and Romantic novels and poetry, building their identities through art appreciation and imaginative pleasure-seeking, or modern hedonism. Thus, Campbell argues that orthodox Calvinism promoted ascetic conduct in business affairs and the breakaway sects encouraged hedonistic pleasure-seeking in consumption. Through this argument, Campbell seeks to explain the enormous rise in consumption that began in eighteenth-century England.

Other scholars trace the rise of consumption further back in history. Sombart (1967) argues that the growth of luxury consumption dating back to the Middle Ages spurred on modern capitalism. He points to celebrations in the ecclesiastical courts, and the increasing role of courtesans (mistresses of noble or wealthy men) in secular courts of the Renaissance as spurring on hedonistic consumption, which, in turn, stimulated demand for luxury goods. Mukerji (1983) suggests that the growth of painting, printmaking, map-making, science, and fashion in the Renaissance and early modern Europe spurred on industrialization: consumption, rather than ideas or religious values, spurred on the rise of capitalism. Finally, De Vries (1975,

1993) focuses on peasants (small farmers) to explain the rise of modern consumption and capitalism. He finds that beginning in the seventeenth century in localities of the Netherlands, Britain, and France, peasant families began to use women's and children's labor to produce more food for sale, which allowed them to purchase goods, in contrast to their traditional pattern of maximizing free time. He describes this as the "industrious revolution" rather than the "industrial revolution," suggesting that peasants' hard work directed toward consumption created more demand for industrial goods and hence reflected changing cultural attitudes toward consumption, which stimulated industry. We explore each of these ideas in [chapter 2](#).

Analysts of contemporary consumption underscore the importance of both rational calculation and pleasure-seeking for understanding modern consumption, drawing upon or criticizing Weber's analysis of the Protestant ethic. Bell (1976) argues that contemporary capitalism is contradictory in that it encourages asceticism at work and hedonistic instant gratification in consumption, values supported by access to credit and the ideas of the 1960s counterculture. Illouz (1997) develops these ideas in her analysis of romantic love in the U.S., arguing that courtship and romance have been linked to consumption since the beginning of the twentieth century, but contemporary women's magazines encourage readers to perceive the process of identifying a soulmate and maintaining a marriage as an exercise of rational study and calculation. Hence, dating and affairs are linked to hedonistic consumption, while committed relationships and marriage are described as requiring the same skills of rationality and self-control as those used in the workplace.

Two recent works follow Weber's (1946a) analysis of bureaucracy. George Ritzer's (2008) concept of "McDonaldization" explores how McDonald's and many large companies have perfected the key elements of bureaucracy Weber identified, delivering standardized, inexpensive products that are extremely popular, but that crowd out more unique, higher-quality products and services from the market.

In contrast, Holt (2004) and Holt and Cameron (2010) argue that consumers often rebel against the "soul-crushing" character of modern bureaucratic workplaces, companies' periodic tendencies to shed employees in the name of "efficiency," and firms' production of standardized products as well as promotion of conformist lifestyles (like the white, middle-class suburban ideal of the 1950s). Consumers resist these processes by forming subcultures whose members rebel against bureaucratic values. "Hillbillies," "outlaw bikers," "hippies," "bohemian artists," "slackers," "dirtbags," "foodies," and blue-collar workers rejected bureaucratic work, standardized products, and conformist lifestyles. Companies often appeal to these groups (many of which are mainly comprised of white males) with messages that affirm their values while promoting the products to broader populations. Brands like Jack Daniel's, Mountain Dew, Budweiser, Volkswagen, and Patagonia have successfully used an anti-bureaucratic cultural message (even though many of these companies are in fact large bureaucracies) to tap into consumers' frustrations and anxieties and to affirm their attitudes and practices.

Additionally, Holt and Cameron (2010) suggest that large consumer-product companies have become "brand bureaucracies." Their adoption of "sciency marketing" that relies on extensive

statistical research sidesteps the innovative and creative market research and advertising needed to appeal to contemporary consumers. Hence, in an interesting twist on Weber, they suggest that bureaucracies' tendency to stifle creativity actually makes them *less* effective businesses than small, upstart innovators, like Ben and Jerry's ice cream, whose unique origins and eclectic approach to product development and marketing make them more grounded in consumer subcultures and more able to generate "breakthrough" ideas that build customer loyalty. In some exceptional cases, "rebels" within large firms adopt similarly effective strategies of "cultural creativity" in advertising, as in the Levi's 501 jeans campaign in Europe. These two works suggest that bureaucracies are efficient machines that can satisfy many consumers, but that also have worrisome shortcomings that may limit the creative and unique aspects of consumption.

Weber (1946b) also developed the concept of status, or social honor. He argued that the upper class of a society attempts to maintain a monopoly over access to luxury goods in order to maintain its image of superiority to other groups. Contemporary examples might include Italian sports cars, vacations to islands unknown to most of the population, or attendance at elite private schools. Once others in the population gain access to these goods (or cheaper imitations), the upper class begins to consume new products to maintain its sense and image of superiority.

Simmel (1957) developed a similar argument in his analysis of fashion. He contended that fashion expresses modern individuals' desire for personal self-expression and to be part of a group. The wealthy tend to be at the cutting edge of fashion, while lower-income people often imitate them, leading the wealthy to move on to another trend. Wealthy individuals pursue fashion to be part of a group but also, as noted above, to exclude outsiders. Further, subordinate groups, like women, may adopt fashion as a "mask," allowing them to fit into society without having to share their individual opinions and thus "stand out" in a crowd. Hence, in addition to being a principle of social exclusion (as in Weber's understanding), fashion also expresses modern individuals' psychological desires to experiment with new goods as well as the contrasting effort to blend in with a crowd. Simmel's essay has been summarized as the "trickle-down theory" of consumption. McCracken (1988) modified this idea to understand how professional women seek to appropriate male symbols of power through workplace fashions. His ideas have widespread influence in the field (Slater 1997; Sassatelli 2007).

Status remains an important concept for understanding how consumption can contribute to the creation and maintenance (or *reproduction*) of social inequalities based on social honor rather than money alone. Thorstein Veblen's (1979) idea of the *leisure class* parallels Weber's notion of status. For Veblen, the upper class of society marks its superiority by opulent displays of wealth through consumption, while members of other social classes seek to imitate the upper class in order to gain greater social status. Further, Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of *economic* (money) and *cultural capital* (education, taste) draw on Weber's concept of status and Marx's understanding of the antagonistic relationship between employers and workers. For Bourdieu, both wealth and education can be used through consumption to assert or claim status. Consider feasting on a portion of *filet mignon* (a symbol of wealth) vs. attending a gourmet cooking

class (reflecting education and taste) as two ways individuals might assert status through consumption. We develop these ideas in [chapter 4](#).

While these critiques of modern consumption focus on the power of producers, advertisers, and status in shaping consumption, several perspectives focus on consumers' active role in crafting meanings through consumption. One perspective refers to the *relational* character of consumption. This view originates in anthropological studies of gift-giving, rituals, and kinship. Douglas and Isherwood (1996) argue that individuals use consumption to create, sustain, and repair personal relationships. Consumption also becomes meaningful through rituals such as birthdays, graduations, weddings, and funerals. These consumption rituals allow individuals to mark the passage of time, move on to the next stage in the life course, and to recognize themselves as part of meaningful social groups (family, friends).

Daniel Miller (1998, 2012) and Viviana Zelizer (1989, 2005a, 2005b) further develop this perspective by examining how mothers seek to satisfy the needs and desires of family members through shopping, and how family members distribute money and expenses based on distinct family roles. This view is an important counterpoint to works focused on advertising or status in that it shows that important aspects and arenas of consumption are not simply a reflection of advertising messages or self-centered efforts to seek social honor. Rather, consumers are often motivated by a sense of social obligation toward others, and goods often connect individuals through shared rituals rather than separating them through status competition.

Daniel Miller (1987, 2005) has developed a broader but similar perspective known as the material culture approach. This perspective seeks to understand how individuals reinterpret and recontextualize mass-produced goods to shape their individual identities or to cement their connections to valued social groups. Miller uses the term "objectification" to describe the process through which human beings create objects that appear separate from themselves and then reappropriate those objects to use them as a source of identity and meaning. One example of these practices is seen when working-class families decorate the inside of their public-housing apartments (which all look the same from the outside) with a wide range of goods to place their personal stamp on these dwellings (compare McCracken's 2005 concept of "homeyness" whereby individuals seek to create a feeling of warmth in their home via its design and decoration with personal photos and handmade goods). For Miller, we create a meaningful personal world via consumption.

Colin Campbell's (2005) argument on hedonistic consumption described above challenges the ideas that status competition or advertisers drive consumption. He argues that the Romantic movement in early nineteenth-century Europe linked pleasure and authenticity with consumption. He contends that in modern consumption, individuals engage in an insatiable search for novelty through new goods as a way to satisfy their desires and to construct authentic selves. Economists' view that individuals rationally rank their desires in relation to their available resources ignores desire's centrality as a motivation for consumption (Slater 1997). Campbell's view focuses on irrational desires that classical economists have ignored (compare Illouz 2009). Campbell's argument has influenced research in marketing where scholars argue that, today, individuals seek meaningful experiences rather than specific goods,

and this desire for authentic experiences is based on emotions (Addis and Holbrook 2001; Arnould and Price 1993; Jantzen and Fitchett 2012).

Cultural studies researchers also criticize the argument that advertising and status drive consumption. Some scholars examine how members of youth subcultures like hippies or punks develop unique consumption-based lifestyles to rebel against the dominant culture (Hebdige 1979, 2000; Milestone and Meyer 2012). Marketing scholars working within the paradigm of “consumer culture theory” (Arnould and Thompson 2005) extend this focus to a wide range of class, gender, regional, and lifestyle-based subcultures (e.g., Belk et al. 1988; Cova et al. 2007; Holt 2004; Holt and Cameron 2010; Kates 2002; Kozinets 2001, 2002; Thornton 1996). This work demonstrates that some social groups may reject advertisers’ messages as well as social pressures demanding they consume in specific ways to increase their social status. Additionally, advertisers may draw on subcultural styles to promote branded goods to “hardcore” members and mainstream consumers.

Other scholars build directly or indirectly on the ideas of Michel de Certeau (1984), who argued that individuals appropriate objects in unique ways that are not prescribed by advertisers. These unique uses of goods represent a subtle form of resistance to the cultural dominance of producers and advertisers. In this context, several scholars argue that consumption is an arena of self-expression and autonomy for women that they have been denied in the labor market or political sphere. Women may gain pleasure through shopping for themselves or satisfying family members’ needs (Fiske 2000; Nava 1997; Bowlby 2001; Miller 1998).

Practice theory is a recent and distinctive approach to consumption. Scholars in this tradition challenge the idea that individuals choose to purchase or use a product based on their personal calculations or desires. Rather, they argue that consumption emerges from everyday routines, behaviors, and attitudes as they intersect with an expanding array of products. These scholars focus less on a person’s desires than their capacities to use a product, their understanding of the rules involving its use, and their level of involvement in its use. We could thus differentiate typical drivers from amateur/professional race-car drivers and “low-rider” enthusiasts, regarding their knowledge, skills, and commitment to driving (Warde 2005). They also understand choice as involving a physical (or embodied) reaction to a good or service that reflects an individual’s prior experiences, relationships, and networks, rather than based on “information processing” or “conscious desire” (Allen 2002). Finally, these scholars suggest that practices draw on beliefs and attitudes that interface with the use of complementary products with specific capacities (like cooking in a kitchen with a variety of appliances or using a computer, fax machine, and printer). Hence, products are part of meaningful, routine practices, but these products’ physical and technical features limit and shape how people use them (Ingram et al. 2007). Practice theory shifts our attention from desires, status, and meaning to consider how products fit into our everyday routines and how those routines shape our identities.

An obvious example of how this works is the smartphone. The rise of cellphones as well as Internet-based chat applications has changed both our forms of written communication and our

expectations about public behavior. Cellphones allow individuals to be linked to two places at one time (where they are physically present in one place while in connection with the person on the other phone in a different location), raising new questions about acceptable behaviors in each place, and the relationship between individuals' physical and virtual presence.

Additionally, Rojek (2011) suggests that the shuffle functions on iPods and other digital music players have changed our relationship to specific songs and musicians because the object sets the play list rather than the listener, and the song played is taken out of the context of the CD of which it is a part. Further, individuals may listen alone rather than in groups because of the personalized nature of the device. Hence, the practice of listening to music changes with the evolution of technology.

A final approach, which is linked to practice theory, examines the actual work of marketers and advertisers, as well as how their practices and interpretations affect consumers and consumption. While there is a long tradition of research examining advertising messages, only recently have scholars examined what marketers actually do, and how these practices affect consumers. Many scholars in this area are influenced by actor-network theory (ANT), which emerged from the field of science and technology studies (STS). ANT scholars argue that people and things operate in an interactive web with unpredictable consequences (Latour 2005). The scholars argue that objects and ideas affect people just as people affect objects. They develop this idea using the term "market devices," which refer to objects, technologies, and ideas that help market actors to calculate prices and act efficiently. However, these devices are "performative" in that these calculations and efficiencies also shape the actions and perceptions of producers, advertisers, and consumers (Muniesa et al. 2007; McFall 2009). For example, advertisers use the results of a marketing survey to develop a campaign. However, this "device" only gives a partial description of actual consumers, and hence it may subtly affect how advertising "creatives" view consumers and the campaign they produce. In this sense, this "market device" has "agency" insofar as it shapes the advertising process (Ariztia 2013).

Scholars have drawn on these ideas to look at the ambiguous image of marketing as existing between economy and culture (Slater 2011); how marketers sought to build an image of competence to legitimate their role in universities and the marketplace (Cochoy 1998); how independent grocers used several technological innovations (like self-service shopping and shopping carts) to attract shoppers, which also changed employees' relations with customers (Cochoy 2011); how current marketing practice enlists consumers to provide their free labor to promote products (Foster 2011); and how department store credit-card risk analysts use statistical data to identify and recruit very poor consumers into the credit system as a source of profits (in spite of the high rate of default), as well as a means to promote credit cards to other consumers (Ossandon 2013). Like practice theory, these studies shift our attention to consumers' complex interactions with marketers and products, and the subtle ways objects, texts, and ideas affect marketers and consumers.

Like other authors (Lury 2011; Sassatelli 2007), this book questions the idea that a single theory can explain all or most of consumer behavior. Rather, to understand contemporary consumption, we must integrate several theoretical perspectives, each of which illuminates a

different dimension of this complex social phenomenon. Therefore, this book will draw on the different approaches outlined above, while emphasizing relational, material culture, and status-based analyses of consumption.

Since this book focuses on consumption in a global context, it enters into the debate regarding whether consumption is becoming more standardized or more diversified in the era of globalization. Some authors argue that the rising power of transnational corporations based in the West is leading to the increasing standardization of consumption along American lines around the world (Ritzer 2003; Smart 2010). In contrast, others argue that individuals and groups in specific countries incorporate global products and images into their distinctive local and national cultural contexts, either combining them with local products and practices, rejecting them, or reinterpreting them in local terms (Caldwell 2002; O'Dougherty 2002; Straubhaar 2007; Miller 1997, 2012). This book follows the latter authors, arguing that to understand consumption in any geographic and cultural setting, it is necessary to carefully examine how individuals and groups use and understand local and imported goods.

Chapter Summaries

I develop each of the themes noted above in the following chapters. [Chapter 2](#) examines the rise of modern retail and credit from the mid-nineteenth century until World War II. While modern consumption first emerged in the period between the Middle Ages and the sixteenth century, our current patterns of consumption date back to the industrial era when factory production began in Europe and the U.S. and department stores sprung up in mid-century Paris (Slater 1997; Sassatelli 2007; McKendrick et al. 1982; Williams 1982). The chapter examines the rise of department, discount, and grocery stores; how these retail innovations changed women's access to public areas; and the emergence of credit, advertising, and branding as key ingredients of the first phase of modern consumption from 1870–1930. The chapter continues by examining the rise of the supermarket and shopping mall in the postwar era, how malls changed the nature of shopping, and variations in mall habitats across the world.

[Chapter 3](#) focuses on changes in retail, marketing, and technology since the 1970s. Most scholars argue that the youth counterculture of the 1960s played a crucial role in the shift from the standardized, mass consumption of the postwar era to the customized, lifestyle consumption of today. These changes are evident in the diversity of consumer lifestyles present today as well as the niche marketing strategies adopted by producers and advertisers. We contrast arguments that see contemporary consumption as increasingly individualistic with others that emphasize consumers' participation in subcultures and "tribes." The advance of the Internet and wireless communications has similarly influenced consumption. Consumers have now become producers through social media sites like YouTube. We have instantaneous access to information about product quality, and we may inadvertently do free labor for companies and advertisers by recommending products to friends on websites like Facebook and Myspace. Illegal downloads and file sharing as well as new technologies for making music have transformed the music industry. This chapter considers the implications of each of these phenomena for the nature of contemporary consumption and the degree to which their global reach has produced a "global" consumer culture with largely similar features.

[Chapter 4](#) explores how consumption reflects inequalities based on social class and status, and how these inequalities may be reproduced across generations. We consider some of the classic arguments about class and status competition by Marx, Weber, Veblen, Simmel, and Bourdieu, and examine some arguments regarding whether or not class-based consumption differences have begun to change or erode in recent decades. We also explore the extent to which these patterns of class and status differences vary across countries within Europe, the U.S., and the Global South, where scholars have recently conducted similar analyses of class and consumption. Additionally, this chapter considers how poverty affects consumption and, finally, explores how class differences take shape in the retail and housing markets.

[Chapter 5](#) examines how gender and race figure in consumption. With the rise of modern consumption, shopping was considered a feminine activity, and yet we have not fully considered how men's and women's consumption differ and how gender ideas shape advertising, product design, and consumer desires and attitudes. This chapter considers two contrasting viewpoints on gender and consumption – that advertising reinforces gender

inequality and that consumption is an arena through which women have gained a degree of liberation. We further consider how lifestyle consumption has broadened the range of identities that men can adopt. Finally, we consider debates regarding acceptable forms of consumption for men and women in predominantly Muslim societies.

Race is an even less commonly studied category in the study of consumption. While sociologists have written extensively about racial inequalities in the job, housing, and education areas, there has been little consideration of how racial groups consume differently and how racial ideas affect consumption. We consider how racial prejudices have affected the consumption opportunities of African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans; as well as how black, Latino, and Asian performers, athletes, and musicians have become “crossover” successes with white audiences. Additionally, we consider how consumption may play a role in the development and evolution of racial identities. We also explore consumption in other racially stratified societies in the Global South. Finally, we examine how some authors have used the concept of intersectionality to examine how class, race, gender, sexuality, and age simultaneously differentiate consumers and shape individual consumption choices.

[Chapter 6](#) focuses on consumption across the life course. We examine how adults consume on behalf of children and what this tells us about our views of childhood. Next, we examine how consumption is an important vehicle of socialization and self-expression for children. We continue by exploring youth consumers as early adopters of new technologies, members of subcultures, and as perceived threats to adults. We continue exploring how consumption figures in the now extended period between adolescence and marriage, committed relationships, and parenting, known as emerging adulthood. Next, we explore the role of consumption in weddings, and how parents choose their children’s schools and educational enrichment activities. Finally, we consider the growing population of elderly persons and the extent to which advertisers and marketers view them as a consumer market.

[Chapter 7](#) looks at consumers as citizens. We often think of consumption as opposed to citizenship, but, in fact, the two go hand in hand. First, governments seek to promote consumption to secure citizens’ support. From the 1930s to the 1970s, this took the form of providing citizens with services (education, subsidized housing, healthcare) as part of their membership in national communities. Further, some governments encouraged citizens to mobilize politically as consumers to secure their rights. Since the 1970s, governments have attempted to privatize services and broaden consumers’ access to imported goods as a way to reduce the prices of goods and hence build political support. Further, consumption and citizenship are linked in the different ways citizens have used consumption (or the refusal to consume) as a way to achieve political objectives. Boycotts and sit-ins are crucial tactics consumers have used to expand their own rights or those of others.

[Chapter 8](#) focuses on consumer citizenship in the contemporary era. With the decline of the welfare state and the rise of globalization, individuals have begun to conceive of their citizenship rights in a global context. Numerous campaigns have attempted to pressure companies to act more ethically through boycotts, culture jamming, and certification of ethically produced goods. Further, consumers seek to achieve their objectives by purchasing

goods that are healthy or fulfill their moral goals. We consider the motivations behind this global consumer activism as well as the extent to which activist consumers have achieved their goals.

[Chapter 9](#) reviews the key arguments in the book and considers their implications for understanding consumption and the broader social contexts in which it happens. How do consumption and inequality go together? How does consumption vary across different locations in the world? How are consumers simultaneously citizens? We consider the extent to which we have answered these questions and how our answers provide insight into the dynamic and ever-changing world of consumption.

2

Marketing and Retail from the Modern Period until the Postwar Era of Mass Consumption

Introduction

When we think about shopping today, this might involve checking online for sales, driving to the local mall, and then making a purchase. We might learn of specific products or sales on the Internet, on billboards, in television advertisements, or through friends. Shopping could also involve a trip to the local big-box supermarket, browsing at boutiques in a shopping district, a long car drive to an “outlet mall” to purchase brand-name goods at a discount, or the purchase of “unique” goods while on vacation. As noted in the introduction, we might even find a particular brand appealing after seeing a clever ad while watching the Super Bowl.

This diverse and complex retail and advertising landscape did not always exist as it does today; nor is our experience of shopping in the U.S. the same as others’ experiences in the wealthy societies of Europe, Asia, or the Global South. In this chapter, we explore the origins of our retail environment in early modern Europe, its rapid expansion in the industrial era in the U.S. and Europe, its consolidation after World War II, and the distinct ways that shopping developed within and beyond the Global North. Simultaneously, we will examine the development of advertising, marketing, and branding. Taking this historical and international journey will help the reader see that today’s retail world is not “natural”; rather, it is the product of different stages of economic and technological development. Furthermore, the mid-twentieth-century model of “standardized” retail in the U.S. and to some extent in other parts of the Global North is distinct from the locally based and uneven development of retail and advertising in the Global South. Hence, we will explore what globalization and localization have meant for advertising and shopping until the 1970s.

Human beings have participated in the exchange or sale of goods for a few thousand years. We can trace shopping back to the bazaars and trading hubs of the Middle East and North Africa. Indeed, in many cities in these regions, the bazaar still plays a central role in the retail sector and in local culture, even though modern department stores and shopping malls coexist with this traditional sector (Dokmeci et al. 2006). A visit to a bazaar or public market is different from our typical experience of shopping. Customers need to bargain with traders, relying on their wit and performance skills to gain an advantage or assess a vendor’s honesty. Shopping at a bazaar or similar market is a much more sociable experience than shopping at the mall because vendors attempt to make the shopper feel that they are trustworthy through expressions of enthusiasm, if not affection (Zukin 2004; Lehtonen and Mäenpää 1997).

Other important shopping sites include the ancient Greek *agora*, or public square, which provided space for both retail sales and political activity. In contrast, many researchers today bemoan the fact that mall owners or managers discourage or forbid political expression inside

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