



# The Sociology of Consumption

A Global Approach

JOEL STILLERMAN

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Joel Stillerman

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# The Sociology of Consumption

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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 Papson 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," "dirt-bags," "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