



2ND EDITION

CONSUMER CULTURE

CELIA LURY

Consumer Culture

Second Edition

Celia Lury



polity

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Introduction: What is Consumer Culture?



This chapter asks: 'What is consumer culture?', and in answer gives a list:

- The availability of a large and increasing number and range of types of goods for sale. There was, for example, a nearly tenfold increase in the number of new products introduced yearly in the

United States between the 1970s and the mid-1990s (Schor, 1999, quoted in Storper, 2001).

- The tendency for more and more aspects of human life to be made available through the market. One instance of this is the marketization of what were previously state or publicly provided services in the UK. Examples include health, housing and education – such that it is said that Britain is now a home-owning nation and that students are consumers of education.
- The expansion of shopping as a leisure pursuit – in the United States, shopping is the second most popular leisure pursuit – six hours per person a week – after watching television (Nicholson-Lord, 1992), while already in 1987 the country had more shopping malls than high schools. More recently, annual retail sales add up to more than \$3 trillion a year, while consumer spending is thought to account for two thirds of US national economic growth (Zukin, 2004).

Ikea's 2006 facts and figures report reckons that 458 million people visited its stores in 2006 – a figure approaching that of the entire population of the European Union. In France alone, Ikea was the second-largest supplier in all sectors of the furniture market in 2005, outdone only by the styleless, no-frills Conforama chain . . . , and, at this rate, may well be set to achieve first place by the end of 2007. Ikea's most popular product, the 'Billy' bookcase, has sold 28 million units world-wide since its inauguration in 1978, a figure slightly more than the population of Iraq. The Swedish superstore was generating an annual income of some 17.3 billion Euros by 2006, which has allowed farmer's son Ingvar Kamprad, who founded the business in 1943, to become one of the richest men in the world. (Hartman, 2007: 484)

- A proliferation of spaces, platforms and modes of consuming, including, for example, an increase in the range of different forums of shopping, from Internet shopping (including eBay and Amazon), retail tourism, mail-order, shopping malls, rummage sales, car-boot fairs, farmers' markets, vintage, pop-up and second-hand shops.
- An increase in sites for purchase and consumption, including the spread of shopping malls – between 1986 and 1990 almost 30 million square feet of shopping centre space was opened in the UK (Cowe, 1994) while the amount of retail space per person in the

USA has quadrupled over the last thirty years (Zukin, 2004) – and the emergence of so-called ‘third spaces’, in between home and work such as the Starbucks chain of coffee shops, but also gyms and clubs.

- The growth in size of retail chain stores, with stores in chains such as Walmart, Target, Home Depot and The Gap occupying up to 200,000 and even 300,000 square feet (Zukin, 2004); the growth in number of retail parks, leisure complexes, and consumption environments, from the increase in ‘themed’ pubs and restaurants to the setting up of Niketowns and Disneyworlds.

Adidas . . . will have 5,000 shops in China by the end of the year [2008]. Its new store in Sanlitun – several miles away from the Bird’s Nest Stadium – opened last month, and is the largest in the world, with 3,170 sq m of retail space over four floors. (Branigan, 2008: 23)

- The lifting in restrictions on borrowing money and the associated change in meaning of being in debt. During the last century, for example, there was a shift from the dubious respectability of the ‘never-never’, through the anxieties of hire purchase to the competitive display of credit cards – to a situation in which an Access card could be your ‘flexible friend’ and a Platinum American Express card is a symbol of elite exclusivity.
- The ethical and political organization of consumers by non-governmental organizations, companies and the state.

A khakhi green café restaurant has quietly materialized in Hemel Hempstead. Under subdued lamplight, with the indie rock of the Editors playing in the background, a lunching doctor sits on a curvy chair modeled on Arne Jacobsen’s modernist classic. He could have chosen Rainforest Alliance certified freshly ground coffee, with British organic milk, or a free-range egg, delivered by a lorry powered by biodiesel from recycled cooking oil, and a bag of carrot sticks or fresh fruit . . . But he has plumped for a Filet-o-Fish, fries and a fizzy drink. (Barkham, 2008: 7)

- The rise of brands, their increasing visibility inside and outside the economy.
- The pervasiveness of advertising in everyday life. It is said that a child today sees over 20,000 commercials annually (quoted in Yan, 2003: 200).

In Japan, Mickey Mouse is being pursued by a cat. By many accounts she is an even more innocent, innocuous, and cute creature. She goes by the name of Hello Kitty. At the risk of sounding conspiratorial, Hello Kitty is not as innocent as she appears, and it is her very innocuousness that conceals her power. . .

. . . Hello Kitty is the best known product of Sanrio, a Tokyo-based company founded in 1960 by Tsuji Shintarô. Sanrio's profits are enormous, totaling 120 million yen in 1998. In 1999, that equals approximately one billion US dollars. (McVeigh, 2000: 226)

A Whitehall counter-terrorism unit is targeting the BBC and other media organizations as part of a new global propaganda push designed to 'taint the al-Qaida brand', according to a secret Home Office paper seen by the Guardian. (Travis, 2008: 1)

- The growing importance of packaging and promotion in the manufacture, display and purchase of consumer goods.

[Bottled water] is now the fastest growing market in the global beverage industry with consumption highest in countries that have access to safe drinking water. It is the second largest beverage sold in the US with per capita consumption doubling between 1993–2003. In Canada bottled water outstrips coffee, tea, apple juice and milk. Markets are also growing in countries that are rapidly modernizing, and where water infrastructure is unsafe and/or underdeveloped. (Hawkins, 2009: 185)

- The rise of the use of the barcode – and more recently radio frequency ID (RFID) labels – to monitor and manage the sales of products: it is estimated that 5 billion barcodes are now scanned every day across the world (Sterling, 2005).
- The emergence of a range of so-called consumer crimes – credit card fraud, shoplifting and ram-raiding – and forms of retail therapy such as spas, health treatments and shopping itself.
- The difficulty of avoiding making choices in relation to goods and services, and the associated celebration of self-fashioning or self-transformation and the promotion of lifestyle as a way of life.
- The increasing visibility of so-called consumer illnesses linked to



what have been called ‘maladies of agency’ (Seltzer, 1993) and pathologies or ‘maladies of the will’ (Sedgwick, 1994) such as addiction, whether it be addiction to alcohol, sex, food or shopping, kleptomania, ‘binge shopping’ or compulsive buying.

One of the things that might strike you about this list is its length (and it would be easy to add more points), but another might be its heterogeneity. How are we to understand the diversity of things, processes, values, norms and practices that make up consumer culture? Most writers believe that there is not a single process at work in the emergence and growth of consumer culture, but a variety, pulling in different directions. Some of the most significant of these processes are:

- 1 The organized interpenetration of economic and everyday life.
- 2 The increasing importance of the exchange of commodities, that is, objects and services appropriated or produced for exchange on the market within an increasingly global capitalist division of labour, driven by the pursuit of profit.
- 3 The development of a series of ongoing relationships between different systems of exchange or regimes of value. These changes

have created a situation in which activities are linked through a whole set of interlinking cycles of production and consumption, associated with, but not necessarily determined by, the organization of commodity exchange.

- 4 The growth of a range of different forms of consumer politics, which seek to mobilize consumers to influence the state, producers and other consumers.
- 5 The active role of the state in organizing collective and individual forms of consumption.
- 6 The use of goods in contemporary societies by specific social groups or cultural intermediaries leading to forms of expertise and the creation of subcultures or lifestyles.
- 7 The political identification of freedom with individual choice.

Given the multiple histories and geographies of consumer cultures in different societies, this book cannot describe or explain the emergence and development of these processes in full. Indeed, it provides only very brief discussions of the history of consumer culture or the different forms it displays in different societies. Instead it aims to give you a series of perspectives to think about these processes. Chapter 1 outlines the significance of a material culture perspective, and stresses the importance of the distinction between the study of consumption and the study of consumer culture. Chapter 2 provides an account of different kinds of exchange, while chapter 3 explores the relations between objects and signs. In chapter 4 a number of explanations, understandings and descriptions of the history of the emergence of consumer culture will be introduced briefly, each of which gives a different emphasis to the processes just outlined here. This will lead into an account of the role of capital and class relations in the shaping of consumer culture in the UK in the second half of the twentieth century. In chapter 5, the importance of race and gender in the expansion of the circuits of consumption will be described by way of a number of case studies, giving a series of snapshots of the complex, dynamic and transnational relations of consumer culture. This will lead into a consideration of the mediatization of the economy, and the contemporary significance of branding in chapter 6. This is followed by an account of the ethics of consumer culture in chapter 7, which explores the complexities of making ethical consumer choices. Finally, chapter 8 addresses the implications of consumer culture for contemporary understandings of the self, social belonging and politics.

There is a double focus in each chapter and across the book as a

whole. On the one hand, the aim is to provide an overview of key perspectives and studies relating to consumer culture, organized in relation to the themes of individual chapters as just described. On the other hand, across all the chapters, the book draws out the implications of these perspectives for understanding the significance of contemporary consumer culture for individual and collective identities. The exploration of the thesis that consumer culture is central to identity highlights the importance of recent transformations in the economy, foregrounding changes in the relationship between production and consumption, and focuses on issues of reflexivity, lifestyle and choice. The argument is that consumer culture has contributed to the emergence and growth of object worlds that encourage forms of reflexivity in individual and collective identity. In conclusion, the final chapter draws attention to debates that suggest that although personal and collective identity is still central to our participation in consumer culture, the terms of that identity are undergoing significant transformation.

1

Material Culture and Consumer Culture

Introduction

This chapter will start by introducing the view that consumer culture is a type of *material culture*, that is, *a culture of the use or appropriation of objects or things*. This is the starting point to the book as a whole since the argument that will be made is that consumer culture is a type of material culture in which the consumer emerges as an identity – as what Frank Trentmann calls a ‘master category of collective and individual identity’:

Put simply, all human societies have been engaged in consumption and have purchased, exchanged, gifted or used objects and services, but it has only been in specific contexts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that some (not all) practices of consumption have been connected to a sense of being a ‘consumer’, as an identity, audience or category of analysis. (2006b: 2)

The book will argue that the emergence of the consumer as a master category of identity is a consequence of the growth of reflexive object worlds. But it begins with the term ‘material culture’ – and not simply consumer culture – for a number of reasons. The first half of the term – ‘material’ – points to the significance of *stuff*, of *things* in everyday practices, while the second half – ‘culture’ – indicates that this attention to the materials of everyday life is combined with a concern with the cultural, with norms, values and practices. The term ‘material culture’ is useful, then, because it implies that the material and the cultural are always combined together in specific relations and that these relations may be subject to study.

The term 'material culture' is also useful because it gives a critical distance on everyday uses of the term 'consumption'. The *Pocket Oxford Dictionary* defines 'consume' as 'make away with, use up, devour, eat or drink up', and there is a common conflation of consumption with the final use or destruction of something. The use of the term 'material culture' makes it clear that consumption as 'use' is *not* always a 'using up', although this confusion, and the use of the language of consumption in phrases such as 'being consumed' by envy, greed, desire, etc. is revealing of some of the anxieties that are attached to consumption in Euro-American societies (for a discussion of the etymology of the word 'consumption', consult Williams, 1983). Instead of interpreting this culture as destruction or using up, focusing on consumer culture as an example of material culture enables consumption to be seen in terms of *appropriation* and *transformation*.

There are two further things to be said about the notion of the material here. First, it refers not simply to objects of consumption, but also to the organization of objects in environments, object worlds and spaces of consumer experiences. Second, it includes what is sometimes called immaterial culture. This is not as paradoxical as it sounds: the term immaterial culture as used here does not refer to non-material entities such as ideas. Instead it refers to (material) products or services whose important characteristics are the outcome of intellectual – or immaterial – labour. In other words, the term 'material culture' will be used in this book to include objects and environments whose characteristics are the outcome of material or physical labour and intellectual or immaterial labour. It is thus a term that can be used to consider the changing balance between these forms of labour and their interrelationship in consumer culture.

As the following chapters will demonstrate, capitalism and mass production are commonly seen as the most important factors in the rise of mass consumption and consumer culture in Euro-American societies, but an account that focuses only on these factors as 'the cause' of consumer culture is too simple. It obscures the significance of systems of trade, imperialism, the shifting impact of particular social groups, the state (in both capitalist and non-capitalist societies), and the importance of other systems of exchange, such as those occurring in the household, the family and communities of one kind or another, as well as the significance of art and design, cultural intermediaries, and subcultures. In other words, while consumer culture has often been understood in relation to production, this couplet – production–consumption – is not sufficiently nuanced on its own.

It isolates and opposes production and consumption, and implies simple causal relations of determination. Different perspectives place a different emphasis on consumption as buying, consumption as having, consumption as being and consumption as doing.

In place of the oppositional couple production–consumption, a variety of different terms to address the complexity of relations between production and consumption are introduced during the course of the book, including the notion of a *cultural circuit* or *cycle*, *mediation* and that of *prosumption* and the *prosumer* (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). These terms make it possible to situate consumption and consumer culture within wider movements of the economy and culture, but the move beyond a strict determination of production by consumption should not be taken to imply that power relations are absent from consumer culture. Rather, the aim is to allow the significance of more complex, iterative, and multidimensional power relations to be explored.

Consumption and consumer culture

Before going any further, it is important to make clear a point that may seem obvious: this book is about *consumer culture*, not *consumption*. As such, it is not concerned with consumption practices in and of themselves, but rather with the *significance and character of the values, norms and meanings produced in such practices*. This focus emphasizes the complexity of the relationship between ownership and use of material goods, economic status, inequality and meaning.

On the one hand, the literature on the growth of consumption is extremely important for understanding something of the context for consumer culture insofar as it shows that a significant proportion of the populations of highly industrialized and (post-)industrial Euro-American societies are *dispossessed* – that is, they are excluded from many forms of commodity consumption as they do not have access to the economic resources necessary for participation. As Zygmunt Bauman points out:

All commodities have a price-tag attached to them. These tags select the pool of potential customers. They do not directly determine the decisions the consumers will eventually make; those remain free. But they draw the boundary between the realistic and the feasible; the boundary which a given consumer cannot overstep. Behind the ostensible equality of chances the market promotes and advertises hides the