

Green Consumerism: An A-to-Z Guide

Consumer Culture

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Any culture that is based on the consumption of things, in which people use materials to identify themselves and to communicate, socialize, and relate to others, is called a “consumer culture.” This particular phenomenon may be considered part of a “material culture;” that is, a culture in which the cultural values that shape our everyday practices and beliefs are driven by the desire to buy, consume, and show off purchases, goods, possessions, and ultimately, status. In contemporary society, consumer symbols of consumption are the cornerstones of the construction of self-identity.

Consumer Culture: Why Do We Want Goods?

The concept of consumer culture is often discussed in the context of capitalism, industrialization, and modernity. Initially, discussion centered on recognition of the effect of consumption on the economic situation. John Maynard Keynes, who was both an economist and a proponent of this view, was in favor of promoting consumption, claiming that together with (industrial) investment, it would result in increasing the total income of a society. With the expansion of capitalism, which saw the focus shift from production to consumption, along with the increasing acquisition of goods and places of and for luxury and leisure, it has been recognized that the concept of consumption is not simply a derivative of production but also a behavior rooted in individual (and sometimes collective) wants and needs.

A further aspect of the question “Why do we want goods” is the relevance of the increase in both satisfaction and status gained from the display of goods and services. More and more emotional desires can become fulfilled by the experience of consumption itself; for example, the comforting familiarity, emotional stimulus, and material reward of shopping malls, the “temples of consumption,” per se. This is where the act or experience of consumption is celebrated, for shopping malls serve as symbols and meanings that are consumed, rather than simply places in which actual tangible goods and services can be purchased.

Why do we want goods? Consumer culture is the representation of a perceived “good life”—the term *good* here being understood as a high-quality and achievable life, inasmuch as the consumer is able to consume products that not only fulfill her or his basic needs but also provide additional luxury and leisure—a life based on the consumption and exhibition of goods and possessions. It is what Thorstein Veblen so aptly termed the way of life or lifestyle of the “leisure classes” and the “show-offs.” The buying pattern he is noted for labeling is “conspicuous consumption.” Thus, consumer culture is a basic function of the need for fashion. Without fashion—the high-ostentatious owning and showing off of an [p. 82 ↓] acquisition—we would not consume on this grand scale: We would not consume items that do not fulfill any need other than to make one feel “somebody,” that allow one to make one's mark both individually or within a group.

At the same time, the existence and degree of consumer culture is a perceptual entity rooted in the perceptions and motivations of the people investigating and talking about it. This is how advertising visualizes consumers' emotions, wants, and needs to sell the symbols, signs, and meanings of consumption. Although the basic assumption underlying consumption includes “free” (rational or irrational) choice of the consumer, consumer culture tends to imply the mass marketing of products and services accompanied by subsequent limited free choice. Concomitant with the merging of the cultural and commercial spheres, art too has come to be viewed as a commodity. Commercialized art such as advertising, for example, has now come to be regarded as goods.

“Consumer culture” has been a critical tenet of modernity. However, with the emergence of the postmodern era, and the understanding that everything is cultural, consumer culture has suddenly become celebrated and idolized, as it plays an increasingly meaningful role in the private lives and spheres of consumers. With this transition, however, the role of consuming has changed markedly. Originally, consuming carried the meaning “to destroy, to use up, and to waste.” Today, consuming needs to be understood more as “constructing” (identity), “enjoying” (the product, social ranks, and signifier it provides), and “communicating” (subjectivity, meanings, and symbols, but also differences and delimitations).

Cultural Imperialism

Since the 1980s, voices have been heard that have predicted the homogenization of cultures, resulting in a so-called world culture based on mass consumption. In an increasingly globalizing world, keywords such as “McDonaldization” and “Coca-Colonization” have signified the spread of a (fast food) consumption pattern in tandem with the spread of American cultural values to the rest of the world. As parts of a consumer culture that has changed societies both socially and economically worldwide, McDonaldization and Coca-Colonization are just two phenomena in the emergence order of consumption that underpins the trend toward valuing material abundance and consumption.

As a consequence of the aforesaid increasingly globalizing world, with its stronger and broader interconnectedness, an even more global consumer culture is emerging. However, the construction of globalization as increasing homogeneity is much debated, with consideration of local needs, products, and consumption patterns still widespread. The dream of marketers to sell one product around the world—to cater to a global consumer culture—has yet to become the reality for many products. In the final analysis, it may be that adaptation and customization are the way to go; that is, that our cultural values will work to determine the nature of our (often compulsive) attachment to goods and consumption per se.

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See Also:

Further Readings

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