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Subjects of Consumption

Passive Dupes or Active Agents?

Who exactly is purchasing all of the commodities produced in mass consumer society—and, more important, why? Social theorists have been debating the various motivations for why we consume since the inception of mass consumer society. Some claim that consumers are **passive dupes**, manipulated by advertisers and marketers into buying whatever they are selling, while others believe that consumers are **active agents**, creatively using commodities to express their tastes and lifestyles. Some theorists argue that commodities are used to control individuals, while others suggest that consumers manipulate commodities to express their class, status, and lifestyle. A few theorists even assert that consumers can use commodities to resist and even rebel against mass consumer society. Others debate whether consumers are rational, sovereign decision makers when they select and purchase consumer goods or if they act irrationally, pursuing pleasure as they attempt to fulfill their daydreams and fantasies. Are consumers victims or rebels, rational utilizers or hedonistic pleasure seekers (Gabriel and Lang 2006)? This chapter will explore the various types of consumers that can be found in mass consumer society.

Emulation, Distinction, or Rebellion?

Veblen: Conspicuous Consumption and Leisure

American social economist Thorstein Veblen, writing at the turn of the twentieth century, established the framework for a critique of mass consumer society. In his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), he argued that **conspicuous consumption**, or the lavish display of wealth, was the motivating force of consumer behavior for the leisure or upper class. He quite abhorred this behavior, describing it as wasteful and an “unproductive consumption of goods,” because it did “not serve human life or human well-being on the whole” (1899/1994:69, 97). While Veblen was most critical of the leisure class for establishing conspicuous consumption as a way to demonstrate their class and status, he stated that “no class of society, not even the most abjectly poor, foregoes all customary conspicuous consumption” (1899/1994:85). However, the classes below the leisure class were motivated by **emulation**. Veblen suggested that the leisure class created standards of tastes and fashion trends, which the lower classes would then copy. Once this happened, the leisure class would have to invent new trends to differentiate themselves from the classes below them—what Veblen referred to as making invidious distinctions based on their social standing. In the words of Georg Simmel,

Just as soon as the lower classes begin to copy their style, thereby crossing the line of demarcation the upper classes have drawn and destroying the uniformity of their coherence, the upper classes turn away from this style and adopt a new one, which in its turn differentiates them from the masses; and thus the game goes merrily on. (1904/1957:136)

This process has been referred to as **trickle-down theory** and, according to Veblen, each class emulated or copied the class right above it in the class hierarchy; thus, the upper middle class emulated the leisure class, while the middle class emulated the upper-middle class and so forth (Ritzer, Murphy, and Wiedenhof 2001).

Veblen also frowned upon what he called **conspicuous leisure**, or the “non-productive consumption of time,” and believed that the “instinct” to work rather than to consume was what needed to be more fully developed for the common good of society (1899/1994:43, 33). Conspicuous leisure allowed the upper class to develop refined manners, etiquette, and tastes, which differentiated it from other classes, who had to work

to survive and did not have the time to cultivate an appreciation for the opera or fine art or travel to Europe to experience other cultures. Knowing how to dress in the most current fashion or what fork to use during a specific course at dinner were signs that one was a member of the leisure class. Veblen argued that over time, due to the changes in “the means of communication and the mobility of the population,” conspicuous consumption would come to trump conspicuous leisure because an individual would become exposed “to the observation of many persons who have no other means of judging his reputability than the display of goods” (1899/1994:86).

Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption continues to be relevant today—many of us use commodities to display our socioeconomic class position. However, today conspicuous consumption revolves around displaying brand logos and upscale spending. According to sociologist Juliet Schor (1998:47), “A whole group of consumer goods that were once neutral symbolically are now highly recognizable,” such as athletic shoes, T-shirts, and even bottled water. These branded or logoed everyday commodities are conspicuously consumed alongside luxury, designer brands. Indeed, the whole idea of a designer logo points to “the importance of visibility” in mass consumer society (Schor 1998:46). Furthermore, people are willing to spend more on items that they can visibly display. For example, in one study, women were found to spend more on expensive lipstick, which they could apply in public, than on facial cleanser, eye shadow, or mascara that are usually used in private (Schor 1998:50).

Another significant change regarding how we conspicuously consume involves who we are trying to emulate. “Today a person is more likely to be making comparisons with, or choose as a ‘reference group,’ people whose incomes are three, four, or five times his or her own” (Schor 1998:4). Instead of trying to emulate the class directly above us in the class hierarchy or “keeping up with the Joneses” next door, we are now participating in **upscale spending** and trying to copy the consumption patterns of the rich and famous, particularly celebrities. “Keeping up with the Kardashians” by watching their television show or following their Twitter feeds makes their celebrity lifestyle feel accessible to the average fan. The problem with upscale spending is that keeping up with the rich and famous is becoming more and more difficult as income and wealth inequality increases in the United States. To participate in upscale spending, more Americans are falling into credit card debt and working longer hours, leaving them unhappy and unsatisfied (Schor 1998:14, 19).

Bourdieu: Taste, Habitus, and Cultural Capital

Although Veblen argued that conspicuous consumption would become more popular than conspicuous leisure as a means to display one's wealth, leisure has not completely disappeared as a device that distinguishes the elite from the masses. Given that U.S. workers fail to take around 429 million paid vacation days per year, those who do take time off of work continue to distinguish themselves as members of the elite (Fisher 2015). On one hand, consumers can display their wealth by taking lengthy vacations to expensive destinations, demonstrating that they have enough money to either take time off of work or do not have to work at all. On the other hand, "cultivation of the aesthetic faculty" still "requires time and application" (Veblen 1899/1994:74). A certain amount of "leisure" is necessary to learn manners and etiquette, as well as develop an appreciation for classical music, expressionist art, and caviar.

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu investigated the relationship between class and taste in his work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1984) and found that although economic capital is strongly correlated with taste, it does not determine it. Cultural capital also plays a role. **Cultural capital** is "widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials used for social and cultural exclusion)" and is "used by dominant groups to mark cultural distance and proximity, monopolize privilege, and exclude and recruit new occupants of high status positions" (Lamont and Lareau 1988:156, 158). Cultural capital is shaped by what Bourdieu calls **habitus**, our mental dispositions or "schemes of perception" (1984:2), that we acquire through socialization, most generally through the institutions of the family and education. The elite attend the same schools, live in the same neighborhoods, and often marry each other, acting as gatekeepers as to who will be allowed access. While it is possible for a person not born into the elite to gain access to their privileged world, it can be difficult for this person to fit in if he or she does not possess enough cultural capital. For example, in the popular movie *Pretty Woman* (1990), the prostitute character played by Julia Roberts tries to buy new clothes on Rodeo Drive and is laughed out of the store because she is dressed indecently. Even though she has enough money to purchase these new, expensive clothes, she does not look like she belongs in the store. Thus, a person cannot buy his or her way into the elite—economic capital is not enough to confer membership. Throughout the movie, her character is continually

coached on the proper manners and etiquette to fit into the world of her high-status “john.” However, she often experiences what Bourdieu refers to as hysteresis when she self-consciously reflects how she does not easily fit into the upper class; what takes her concentration and patience to perform comes naturally to the elite (Bourdieu 1984:209).

In practice, we are not always aware that our habitus is shaping our taste, creating predictable consumption patterns, and reproducing class distinctions unless we experience hysteresis or are consciously trying to increase our cultural capital, such as a Midwestern working-class student attending an Ivy League university. We just “like what we like” and “act how we act” without spending a lot of time contemplating why this is the case. But, even though the preference for French wine over soda pop with a meal seems harmless, it could in fact account for why someone receives a job offer or is asked out on a second date. According to Bourdieu, taste is “one of the most vital stakes in the struggles fought in the field of the dominant class and the field of cultural production” (1984:11) and contributes to creating and reproducing structural class inequality. Indeed, taste, habitus, and cultural capital can affect our life chances. A child raised in a family that reads books, engages in conversation using a large vocabulary, and encourages artistic and musical creativity will be better prepared for and more likely to succeed in school than a child raised in a family that does not—and success in school translates not only to higher cultural capital but higher economic capital as well. This creates a privileged position for the next generation, who will be raised with high cultural and economic capital and use these “nonmerit resources” to reproduce class distinctions (McNamee and Miller 2009:79). Chapter 7 discusses the relationship between economic and cultural capital and higher education in the United States in more detail.

While Bourdieu examined taste in French society during the 1960s and 1970s, more recent research on taste in the United States has found that over time, elite or highbrow taste has changed from “snobbish exclusion” to “omnivorous appropriation” (Peterson and Kern 1996:900). Some reasons for this change include greater geographic migration and social class mobility, exposure to mass media, an increase in tolerance, and a devaluation of the arts as “markers of exclusion” (Peterson and Kern 1996:905). **Omnivore taste** is characterized as eclectic and diverse, embracing both high- and lowbrow culture. Today’s elite listen to both classical and country music, as well as attend art gallery openings and

professional football games. In contrast, today's lower classes have "singular" or "limited" tastes" (Khan 2012). This can be observed in food preferences, which are elaborated upon in Chapter 5. A British study found that a variety of ethnic cuisines were consumed by those with high-status occupations to display "specialized knowledge with a cosmopolitan orientation" (Warde, Martens, and Olsen 1999:123). Knowing how to appreciate different ingredients and spices, pronounce certain ethnic dishes, or eat with chopsticks have become signs of class distinction associated with being cultured and sophisticated. Meanwhile in the United States, lower classes are rebelling against yuppie food trends and government dietary guidelines to eat more fruits and vegetables by consuming Wonder white bread and Spam canned meat (Bobrow-Strain 2013:163).

The Birmingham School: Bricolage and Resistance

One could argue that a certain amount of "leisure" is not just necessary to acquire high cultural capital but any kind of cultural capital, including what is considered lowbrow, countercultural, or subcultural. It is possible for individuals to create their own style or fashion, not just emulate the class above them, engage in upscale spending, or conform to the taste of the dominant classes. Scholars at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (1964) at Birmingham University in England—often referred to as the Birmingham school—focused on how working-class, youth subcultures, such as the mods, teddy boys, skinheads, and punks, created distinctive styles as a means of resistance to the dominant culture's norms and values (Hall and Jefferson 1975; Hebdige 1979; McRobbie 1991; Willis 1978). According to Dick Hebdige, style is a form of **bricolage** or "structured improvisation" and is "basically the way in which commodities are used in subculture which mark the subculture off from more orthodox cultural formations" (1979:103–4; de Certeau 1984). For example, punks used safety pins as jewelry and skinheads appropriated Dr. Marten boots as part of their "uniform." By subverting the intended use of mass-produced commodities, youth subcultures also transformed their meanings, engaging in "semiotic guerilla warfare" with the dominant culture (Hebdige 1979:105). In this process, youth subcultures demonstrated that they could be creative agents, not passive or manipulated dupes.

The fact that groups outside of the elite can instigate their own styles and fashions challenges the cultural hegemony or power of the elite, indicating that they do not have absolute control to make others conform to their norms and values (Clarke et al. 1975:11–12). Furthermore, the fact that these nonelite styles and fashions are occasionally emulated by the elite challenges the trickle-down model of conspicuous consumption. Styles and fashions can **trickle up** from social or class locations below the elite. From Levi Blue Jeans to Converse One Stars, styles from the working class and from youth subcultures have trickled up the class hierarchy. Today, some multinational corporations like Reebok even hire people to go out on the streets and **coolhunt**, discovering what is cool by observing what certain youths are wearing. These street styles are then incorporated into new designs and sold back to both the elite and the masses. Using coolhunters accelerates the trickle-up process. New styles are introduced by companies every few months instead of every few years because “the act of discovering what’s cool is what causes cool to move on” (Gladwell 1997).

The trickle-up and coolhunt movement of style and fashion suggests that class differentiation is not the sole motivation for conspicuous consumption. While class remains one variable that explains why individuals consume, it is not the sole determinant. Sociologist Herbert Blumer argued that instead of class differentiation, consumption, particularly fashion, was driven by **collective selection**, or a shared, societal mood or attitude. Collective selection suggests that the elite do not so much create fashion but follow it like everyone else; thus, fashion does not so much trickle down as disseminate horizontally from a variety of groups. According to Blumer, “*The fashion mechanism appears not in response to a need of class differentiation and class emulation but in response to be in fashion . . . to express new tastes which are emerging in a changing world*” (1969:281; Davis 1992). Today, cool may be replacing class as “the central determinant of social prestige” (Heath and Potter 2004:200) and may be what is informing the collective mood of mass consumer society.

Just as the elite were forced to create new styles to differentiate themselves from the classes below it in Veblen’s trickle-down theory, cool people must create new styles to differentiate themselves once companies have co-opted them. According to Hebdige (1979:94), when subcultural signs, like dress or music, are converted into mass-produced objects, a process of **recuperation** takes place. For example,

when punks use safety pins as earrings, a company can recuperate or reclaim the safety pin by intentionally producing and marketing them as earrings. Often businesses will practice **co-optation**, copying styles from subcultures or countercultures, subverting their rebellious meanings, and making them palatable for mass society. Co-optation is a way of “neutralizing” countercultural dissent or resistance to mass consumer society, demonstrating that capitalism is quite capable of tolerating subversion, particularly if it can be commoditized (Heath and Potter 2004:34–35). Perhaps, as Thomas Frank argues in his book *The Conquest of Cool* (1997), commerce and countercultures are not so much enemies but allies in a battle against conformity. However hard countercultures try to oppose mass consumer culture and conformity, they seem doomed to participate in a game that they cannot win. Corporations recuperate and co-opt their styles, forcing subcultures to create new styles, which will then be recuperated and co-opted. Therefore, these subcultures are inevitably providing fuel for the engine of mass consumer society, which they oppose. As Dick Hebdige (1979:96) states, “Youth cultural styles may begin by issuing symbolic challenges, but they must inevitably end by establishing new sets of conventions.” Thus, the question arises as to how much agency consumers really possess when it comes to resisting mass consumer society. Does bricolage or subverting the intended meanings and uses of consumer goods constitute rebellion if it does not change the dynamics of mass consumer society?

Passive Dupes?

The Frankfurt School and the Culture Industry

The argument that mass consumer society has the power to absorb and commoditize rebellion, revolt, dissent, and subversion can be traced back to the scholars of the Frankfurt School for Social Research (1923), including Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse. The Frankfurt school developed what is known as **critical theory**, which questions whether scientific rationality and technology represents progress and liberation or stultification and repression. They situate culture, not the economy, as the primary source of social control in mass consumer society, claiming that

cultural control is more invisible as it alters our consciousness and makes us passive, uncritical consumers (Ritzer 2009). The **culture industry**, including advertisers, marketers, and television, movie, and music producers and entertainers, creates **false needs** for consumer goods that we neither want nor need, yet we purchase anyway, which results in our own repression (Horkheimer and Adorno 1993; Marcuse 1964:4–5). However, we do not comprehend that we are repressed because the culture industry manipulates us into thinking that buying another frivolous pair of designer shoes or watching three hours of professional football every Sunday fulfills our true needs and desires. The culture industry has created a society where “people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment” and have anchored social control in “the new needs which it has produced” (Marcuse 1964:9).

According to Marcuse, pursuing false needs over true needs has resulted in the loss of critical thinking capabilities in mass consumer society, creating what he calls **one-dimensionality** (1964:10–11). Individuals can no longer think for themselves or oppose what the culture industry tells them to do because they have lost the ability to reason. If Apple tells us we need the newest version of its iPhone to be smarter, we stand in line outside one of its retail stores overnight to be the first customer who can buy it without thinking about how much this corporation and its technology are controlling our lives.

The Frankfurt school was concerned with not only how the culture industry indoctrinates consumers but also how it creates a standardized and homogeneous society. In particular, they were dismayed by how the culture industry “forces together the sphere of high and low art,” which resulted in the dominance of popular or mass culture (Adorno 1991:85). Horkheimer and Adorno (1993:133, 125) call popular television shows and movies “rubbish,” based on predictable, “ready-made clichés” that could “be slotted in anywhere.” Mass culture requires little creativity to produce and little imagination to consume. Indeed, part of the attraction of mass culture is that it provides an escape from thinking about the real world, much less changing it. According to Horkheimer and Adorno (1993:144), “The liberation which amusement promises is freedom from thought.” They thought that high art was desecrated when it became commoditized or democratized. The fact that most individuals, regardless of class

or education level, can listen to an opera or visit an art museum does not necessarily mean that they can appreciate or understand high art. Democratization has not elevated art but turned it into a commodity to be consumed by the masses. Thus, art no longer captures the abstract ideals of beauty or truth but is just another amusement produced by the culture industry to keep us pacified and entertained. Fordist production techniques of standardization further debase the true purpose of art. Walter Benjamin thought that the ability of some technologies, like film and photography, to mass reproduce art led to its disenchantment. Mass reproduction resulted, he argued, in the loss of "the aura of the work of art," robbing it of its authenticity (1969:221, quoted in Shull 2005:62).

Just as capitalist mass production alienates workers, capitalist mass consumption alienates consumers. Marcuse contended "Free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear—that is, if they sustain alienation" (1964:7–8). Adorno (1991:85) agrees, claiming that "the customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object." As an object, the consumer is classified, organized, and labeled and "something is produced for all so that none may escape" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1993:123). Take, for example, one dominant actor in the culture industry, advertisers. They spend over \$200 billion every year in the United States (Klein 1999:11) in an attempt to convince consumers that they have the freedom of choice, such as having a Burger King hamburger "Your Way" or that they have the power of sovereignty if they drive a Ford because "Everything We Do Is Driven by You." The false freedom and power that advertisers and the culture industry in general promote turn consumers into "helpless victims to what is offered [to] them" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1993:123); however, consumers suffer from false consciousness because they do not understand that they are victims. They think that the choice between one hundred different types of cereal in a grocery store is true freedom and do not contemplate the fact that they really are not free *not* to choose or that the one hundred different types of cereal are produced by a small handful of corporations. In sum, the Frankfurt school would agree that "our increasingly market-saturated life spaces make us dumber, lazier, fatter, more selfish, less-skilled, more adolescent, less politically potent, more wasteful, and less happy than we should be" (Dawson 2005:2).

Children as Consumers

One consumer demographic that is particularly vulnerable to the manipulative powers of the culture industry is children. Historically, children were not constructed as consumers until the 1930s, when manufacturers, advertisers, and merchandisers started to view them as a primary market. Consumer goods, like clothing, began to be created according to the preferences of children, instead of their parents, and some stores reconfigured their sales floors to be more child-friendly (Cook 2004:2–3). Today, children are completely entrenched in consumer culture. Retail stores like Gap Kids and Toys-R-Us, cable channels like Nickelodeon and the Disney Channel, and food items like Fruit Roll-ups and McDonald's Happy Meals, have all been created to take advantage of this prized segment of the marketplace. While many children may not have much money of their own, most possess the power to influence the purchasing power of their households—even if this power entails simply nagging their parents.

The development of children into consumers can be understood as empowering because it provides a way for them to be recognized as having individual identities and perhaps even autonomy in terms of making decisions in the marketplace. But, turning children into consumers can also be considered exploitative, socializing them early into a culture that emphasizes that the acquisition of material goods is a means to happiness and a symbol of success. Further exploitative practices include marketing unhealthy foods, like sugary cereals and soft drinks, to children; forcing them to watch commercials in public schools during Channel One broadcasts; exposing them to violence in popular video games; and fabricating unrealistic body images in dolls (Cook 2004; Buckingham 2011; Schor 2004).

But, do children always strictly follow the ways that the culture industry dictates to them regarding how they should play with their toys, eat their food, or wear their clothes? In her ethnography of how black, mostly low-income children confront consumer culture, Elizabeth Chin (2001) found that some children do not passively adhere to meanings imposed on consumer goods by advertisers. For example, several girls in her study who played with a white Barbie doll braided her long, blonde hair to imitate their own hairstyles. They also actively critiqued how she was a stereotype of dominant white society, instead of being overweight, pregnant, or the victim of abuse, which corresponded to images and experiences in their own community.

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In addition, children do not necessarily act in greedy or selfish ways in their role as consumers. When children in her study were given money to spend, many purchased practical goods that they needed, shared goods that they purchased with their siblings and friends, and bought things not just for themselves but also gifts for their caregivers.

Questions

1. Do you think that advertising that targets children should be banned? Why or why not? If it is, how do you think this might change the future of consumer culture?
2. Many cable, satellite, and streaming channels provide programming for children, such as ABC Family, the Disney Channel, and Nickelodeon. Watch a program on one of these channels and write down your observations on how they construct children as consumers.
3. Defend this statement: Children are not necessarily passive victims of consumer culture but possess some agency. Provide a specific example to support your defense.

Frankfurt school theorists have been criticized for being too elitist in their judgment of popular or mass culture and giving too much power to the culture industry and too little power to the consumer. While the culture industry possesses a large amount of control over production and consumption, it does not, as the Birmingham school demonstrates, have absolute control. Furthermore, the Frankfurt school neglects what consumers “make of what they ‘absorb,’ receive, and pay for” (de Certeau 1984:31). An individual may watch hours of television, but “it remains to be asked what the consumer *makes* of these images” (de Certeau 1984:31). Are we just watching television passively, or are we interacting with it by yelling at the screen when a referee makes what we think is a bad call? Are we watching television alone or with our family? Are we unconsciously tempted by the fast food shown on an ad, or are we actively making fun of the manipulative tactics used in these ads? Are we even watching television at all—or is it on in the background as we eat dinner or do our homework? Finally, the Frankfurt school did not anticipate how consumers could become active participants in

the production of culture. With the advent of the digital economy, the number of individuals involved in creative work is growing (Johnson 2015). People can now more easily self-publish their own books, direct their own music videos, and sell their own handmade jewelry using new digital platforms like YouTube and Etsy. While these activities may not challenge the hegemony of the culture industry at large, they do highlight how individuals can be active producers instead of passive victims in a mass consumer society.

Utility or Hedonism?

Some theorists frame their understandings about why we consume through the lens of utility and hedonism, as well as debate whether or not consumers are rational decision makers or hedonistic pleasure seekers. Are consumers motivated to consume to maximize their utility or to fulfill their fantasies? Do we carefully calculate each purchase to ensure that we obtain the greatest quantity of goods for the lowest prices, or do we lavishly indulge our desires when we consume? Either way, theorists who stress either utility or hedonism challenge the “class-based status-driven models” of consumption proposed by Veblen, Bourdieu, the Birmingham school, and the Frankfurt school (Schor 2007:19). Instead of trying to display socioeconomic class positions with conspicuous consumption or reproduce class distinctions with cultural capital, consumers are viewed as seeking to exercise their individual preferences or express their individuality. Furthermore, unlike the Frankfurt school, both the utility and hedonism approaches view consumers as agents, not dupes—even if we might act irrationally, we still possess autonomy.

Sovereignty and Choice

The idea that consumers are rational decision makers seeking to maximize their **utility**, or preferences, is a standard assumption in classical economic thought. Liberal economic theorists argue that preference formation is determined by prices and income (Pietrykowski 2009:3) and “refrain from making any judgments about the substantive needs and desires of individuals” (Slater 1997:46). Indeed, the consumption of utility “allows no distinction between good and bad, essential and nonessential, needs and wants” (Slater 1997:49); thus, utility has nothing to say about the “substantive content of [a consumer’s] preferences” (Knox 2005:384).

Utility as a motivation for consumer behavior depends on **consumer sovereignty**, or “the notion that consumers are the best judges of their own welfare and that their economic choices are effective in advancing their self-interests” (Redmond 2000:177). At the heart of consumer sovereignty is the concept of choice, particularly the notions that choice is free, that it increases economic growth and efficiency, and that it is better to live in a society that values choice than one that does not (Gabriel and Lang 2006:26). Interestingly, the concept of consumer sovereignty has been used throughout the years to try to equate economic markets with democracy. Just as citizens have the right to vote for their choice of political candidate, consumers can exercise their “right to choose” by voting with their wallets and pocketbooks for or against certain products (Schwartzkopf 2011:110). If consumers have this kind of power, then it means that they can effectively control production; products that do not sell will not make a profit for the producer and subsequently will cease to be manufactured (Knox 2005). Chapter 8 explores the political potential of consumer activism, including the different tactics that consumers can use to try to achieve social change.

The agency and power of consumers from the perspective of consumer sovereignty is clearly at odds with the passive victims portrayed by the Frankfurt school. The economist Gary Becker argues that instead of manipulating consumers, “advertising conveys information to consumers” and that they “receive a greater perceived input in terms of utility from advertised goods than from others” (Redmond 2000:181). But, others question whether the choice emphasized by liberal economists is really free if consumers lack basic information about the goods they purchase and the choice between similar items is “only choice in a marginal sense.” The ideology of choice can also be used to deceive consumers and remove responsibility from those who produce consumer goods and services (Gabriel and Lang 2006:26). For example, a corporation might produce and distribute an unhealthy product, like soda, or an ineffective product, like wrinkle cream. When consumers who drink soda become obese or consumers who use wrinkle cream continue to have wrinkles, the corporation can reply “but we didn’t force you to purchase these items—it was your free choice, so we are not to be blamed for your weight gain or wrinkles.” While government regulations can protect consumers from some defective and unsafe products, the belief in *caveat emptor* (buyer beware) makes it difficult to conceive of consumers as victims in societies where the ideology of consumer sovereignty is strong. Indeed, far from

challenging the logic of choice, many states have applied it to justify the privatization of government goods and service, like public utilities (Gabriel and Lang 2006:41). In the United States, the logic of choice is being used to try to validate the privatization of Social Security, rationalize vouchers for education, and create fear of establishing a government-run health care system. As governments embrace the logic of choice, they begin to view and treat their citizens more and more like consumers.

Others question if utility can really capture the dynamics of consumer behavior. Rational consumers have been described as “undersocialized” because it is assumed that they do not take social or cultural factors into account when they decide to purchase an item (Redmond 2000:185). It seems that the consumer has “achieved sovereignty at the cost of becoming an isolated rational individual whose tastes are given” (Winch 2006:32). Are consumers really just shopping to fulfill their individual preferences determined by price and income, or are they being influenced by their neighbors or celebrities or the culture industry? Some theorists wonder if consumer sovereignty is just an ideology promoted by corporations to make us feel empowered. Schor notes that it is interesting that the growing power of corporations in recent years “has been accompanied by an ideology that posits the reverse—that the consumer is king and the corporation is at his or her mercy” (2007:28). Others acknowledge that while consumers may be able to practice sovereignty in the marketplace, they do not necessarily exercise their freedom of choice to maximize their utility. Some consumers “vote” for social justice by purchasing fair trade coffee, which usually costs more than mass-produced coffee. Furthermore, focusing on consumer sovereignty, choice, and utility does not explain what consumers actually *do* with the goods that they purchase, so these motivations for consumer behavior end at the point of sale.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of how consumer sovereignty and choice is typically analyzed is its neglect of poor consumers, who because of their limited incomes and where they live do not have the freedom to always act rationally in the marketplace. If poor consumers are acknowledged at all, it is often to morally critique what they purchase, especially if they are using welfare funds on items not deemed necessities. Given that approximately 14.5% of all Americans are currently living below the poverty line and many more may be classified as living in relative poverty, poor consumers constitute a notable segment of the market, even if they might not have a large amount of discretionary income. Because of limited options, people who reside in low-income areas are forced to

pay on average 41% more for similar goods and services as those who live in more affluent areas (Hill 2002:214). According to Andreasen, poor consumers suffer from “sources of outrageous consumer exploitation,” especially at the hands of questionable credit lenders (1975:26, quoted in Hill 2007:78). The lack of legitimate banks in their neighborhoods makes it difficult for poor consumers to obtain conventional loans, positioning them as targets for predatory lending practices that involve high interest rates and late fees. James Baldwin best described the difficulty of poor consumers to maximize their utility when he wrote that “anyone who has ever struggled with poverty knows how extremely expensive it is to be poor” (Sturdivant 1969:1, quoted in Hill 2002:214).

Desire and Difference: Colin Campbell and Postmodernism

Instead of our individual preferences being determined by rational calculations, like price and income, some theorists suggest that consumers can—and should—have fun and “seek to reclaim pleasure, not least physical, sensuous pleasure, from sanctimonious moralizing and the grim heritage of the Protestant ethic which said ‘Work! Work! Work!’” (Gabriel and Lang 2006:97). Rather than delaying our gratifications and saving money, we should celebrate the fact the mass consumer society provides us the means to satisfy our pleasures and needs instantaneously. In *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1989:60), Colin Campbell argues that individuals are motivated to consume not because of status competition but because they want to fulfill their fantasies and daydreams. Campbell makes a distinction between pleasure and utility as motivations for consumer behavior, which typically have been equated in economic theory. He suggests that utility should be understood as the satisfaction of needs, while pleasure represents the satisfaction of desire and sensation. For example,

Food and drink can provide pleasure via the senses without any being ingested, as is the case with the aroma of a steak or the bouquet of a wine, whilst the body’s need for the nourishment may be met by a process of direct injection which bypasses the taste buds entirely. (Campbell 1989:61–62)

While the injection of nourishment may satisfy our utility or need for food, it does nothing to satisfy the pleasure associated with the desire of consuming food. Campbell makes a further distinction between **traditional**

hedonism that is based on physical pleasure and **modern self-illusory hedonism**, which is based on emotional experiences like daydreaming. According to Campbell, modern consumers long “to experience in reality those pleasures created in the imagination, a longing which results in the ceaseless consumption of novelty” (1989:205). This quest for novelty keeps the consumption cycle in motion because when consumers purchase goods to fulfill fantasies, they are inevitably disappointed, so they must construct new fantasies to fulfill and find new goods to purchase. The inevitable disappointment that occurs once we have purchased a new pair of shoes or worn them for a while does not seem to dampen our hedonistic desire to seek to experience pleasure for its own sake or fantasize about purchasing a new pair of shoes (Slater 1997:96).

While Campbell situates his study of consumption in eighteenth-century England, other theorists have focused on the role that pleasure plays in contemporary society. In particular, postmodern theorists celebrate the “liberatory” aspects of consumption, including its “emancipatory potential” (Firat and Venkatesh 1995:239). A **postmodern world** is characterized by play and fragmentation with individuals who are free to experiment with a variety of identities and lifestyles. Above all else, the postmodern consumers want to fulfill their desire to express difference and “make lifestyle a life project” (Lyotard 1984; Featherstone 1991:86). Instead of wanting to keep up with the Joneses, postmodern consumers want to be different from them (Rutherford 1990:11, quoted in Gabriel and Lang 2006:37). According to Firat and Venkatesh (1995:253), in a postmodern world “the individual is freed from seeking or conforming to one sense or experience of being; the disenchantment from having to find consistent reason in every act, in every moment, is transcended, and the liberty to live each moment to its fullest emotional peak . . . is regained.” In other words, a postmodern consumer can be a Goth one day and a Preppy the next day without feeling like she is being unfaithful to some stable identity. After all, the postmodern world is one big game, of which the postmodern consumer is “hyper-aware” (Slater 1997:197). The superficial trumps the profound in a postmodern world where appearance reigns supreme and “a decentered selfhood has become a plurality of intermittent, disconnected, recognition-seeking spectacles of self-presentation” (Langman 1992:40). Thus, from a postmodern perspective, a person really can be what he or she wears.

While the postmodern consumer appears to be a refreshing, engaged actor compared to the dull, passive dupes of the Frankfurt school or the calculated, decision makers portrayed by liberal economists, the fragmented world that

the postmodern consumer encounters may threaten to offer a schizophrenic experience of disconnection and incoherence (Jameson 1984). For some, this can be experienced more as a nightmare than fun. Furthermore, consumers may be fulfilling their fantasies in a more calculating than irrational manner. Mike Featherstone (1991:86) suggests that **calculated hedonism**, a combination of a calculus of style and an aestheticization of rationality, best characterizes postmodern consumer behavior. Rather than trying to dichotomize pleasure and rational decision making, we should attempt to understand how they work together in contemporary consumer culture. According to Zygmunt Bauman, "Reality, as the consumer experiences it, is a pursuit of pleasure. Freedom is about the choice between greater and lesser satisfaction, and rationality is about choosing the first over the second" (1992:50). However, just as choice may be promoted by the culture industry and corporations to make us feel empowered, so might be the pleasure and liberation experienced by the postmodern consumer. Therefore, postmodern consumer liberation—if it exists at all—might be "institutionally authorized by market-mediated institutions" (Arnould 2007:100). Our postmodern play and fantasies may be more structured than we realize.

Conclusion

In sum, much of the controversy surrounding what motivates consumer behavior revolves around the broad theme of whether consumers possess agency or are passive dupes. If one assumes consumers possess agency, then the next question concerns the purpose of this agency: do consumers exercise their sovereignty to achieve utility or to fulfill fantasies or to rebel? If one assumes consumers are passive dupes, then one must examine if consumers are being manipulated to conform to the norms and values established by the upper class or by the culture industry. Taking exclusive sides in this controversy is problematic because, on one hand, a strong agency approach often fails to acknowledge that agency may be "constructed *by* producers, rather than being deployed against them" (Schor 2007:24–25). On the other hand, a strong dupes approach ignores the various ways individuals construct identities and create meaning with consumer goods as well as find pleasure in consumer activities like shopping or watching television. Perhaps Yiannis Gabriel and Tim Lang best summarize the consumer as "unmanageable" because "as consumers we can be irrational, incoherent and inconsistent, just as we can be rational, planned, and organized" (Gabriel and Lang 2006:4).