CONSUMERS AND CONSUMPTION IN COMPARISON

Edited by Eivind Jacobsen, Pål Strandbakken, Arne Dulsrud and Silje Elisabeth Skuland

COMPARATIVE SOCIAL RESEARCH

VOLUME 37

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FOREWORD

Within the social sciences, the study of consumers and consumption has gained momentum these last years. Consumption has been on the radar of sociologists ever since the classics in the later part of the 19th century (more on this in the Introduction). However, as a research field in its own, with its own canon, journals, curriculums and PhD programmes, it's relatively new. It started out in the early 90s within a small network of mostly Nordic and British researchers, confined to European Sociological Associations (ESA) RN5. Famously, in the first interim network meeting in Bergen in 1992, all the participants could be seated in two taxis. This contrasts to the last interim meeting, also this held in Norway (at Consumption Research Norway SIFO, in Oslo), where participants numbered more than 150 and came from all of Europe, and even some from Asia and the United States.

To the contributors to this issue, consumption is a broad phenomenon encompassing activities related to acquisition, modification, use, repair, and finally the disposal of goods and services. As such, consumption is about much more than shopping or choosing products in markets, most frequently in focus in the marketing literature. Moreover, to be a consumer is for us a part-time role where people engage in such activities. In other words, for us – the contributors for this volume – no one is a consumer in essence, but everyone enrolls and performs consumer roles daily.

Consumption and the enactment of consumer roles is currently deeply entangled in all kinds of big social questions. The English sociologist David Evans (2022) writes on connecting consumption and the social.

- Consumption is a key reference point for understanding macro-social processes of organization and change.
- Consumption is a societal phenomenon to be understood through recures to "social" in contrast to the methodological individualism found in marketing and behaviourism.
- Consumption is linked to today's big societal challenges, like climatic change, health, etc. both as contributor and site for solutions.

Through this volume, we would like to show these three points by means of a set of articles applying a comparative approach to different consumption practices. The various papers compare consumption across nations, and consumption areas, thereby demonstrating the contextual embedding and situatedness of consumption and consumers and the necessity to study them in relation to production, politics and various forms of regulations.

The editors would like to thank the reviewers for their time and friendly advice, and the Editorial Board headed by Professor Emeritus Fredrik Engelstad, both for the invitation to produce this issue, and for support and advice during the process. We would also like to thank the publisher, Emerald, for its professional flexibility, and Consumption Research Norway (SIFO) for offering time and administrative resources. SIFO – for short – is currently the largest European social science–based institute solely engaged with consumer research. It is therefore somewhat appropriate that a large number of the contributors work there.

INTRODUCTION: CONSUMPTION IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Pål Strandbakken, Eivind Jacobsen, Arne Dulsrud and Silje Elisabeth Skuland

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CONSUMERS AND CONSUMPTION IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

It's a truism that we live in a consumer society. Consumption, often understood as the private acquisition and use of goods acquired through monetary exchange in markets, is almost everywhere, engulfing the everyday life of large parts of the human population. For some, consumer society is a synonym for capitalist society, promising affluence, and freedom, but also economic differences, alienation, decadence, littering and waste. Hence, the concept is heavily loaded morally and politically and at the heart of almost every major current political debate (Sulkunen, 2015, p. 150).

The concept is often also used to pinpoint who is in charge of everything, notably the consumer. They are supposed to be 'always right' and thus the one producers and sellers must bow to. However, if the consumer is King, then they are also the ones to blame and shame, for cultural flattening, for resource depletion, for nature and climate crises, for exploitation of the southern working poor, and so on and on. As such, the consumer has been the hero of the political and economic liberals and the villain of the left and sometimes also by the more aristocratic inclined right. This has also had its effects on post-war consumption research. The often left-leaning sociologists have mostly shunned consumption as a research topic, while the more liberal economists and of course the marketing researchers have embraced it.

Hence, today, most consumer research is done in business schools and marketing departments of private firms.[1] This research aims to understand consumers, improve brand management and feed into various forms of corporate decision-making processes. The methodological palette of this research is diverse, feeding on most of the methods in general use in the social and psychological

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sciences. Theoretically though, it mostly ascribes to *psychological and social-psychological models* of the consumer. Consumers are mostly portrayed as individual utility seekers with somewhat restricted rationality. Central to this literature is a focus on *choices* consumers make in *markets*, how these are made and/or arranged. Even though marketing researchers may study how wants, desires and preference are made and developed, their moment of truth is very much the buy/not buy decision of individuals. As such, consumers tend to be portrayed as information processors and decision-makers, driven by rational considerations and various kinds of sentiments. The latter often implies that consumers are seen as subject to biological-evolutionary-derived cognitive biases distorting rational decision-making and opening the door for manipulation and hence room for persuasion, which marketing is all about.

Another major strand of academic consumer literature is preoccupied with the aggregate effect of individual choices, known as *demand*, that is 'the combined quantity that buyers wish to purchase at any conceivable price' (see any textbook, for instance Begg et al., 2003, p. 26). Demand is – of course – together with its twin concept of *supply* and its cousin *price*, the basic building blocks of economics. In this literature, consumers are mostly studied through aggregates supposed to reveal actual *consumer behaviour* in markets. In other words, in this literature, the consumer as such is a black box whose inner life only can be derived from how they prioritize within the limits of their restricted buying power. Besides sharing marketing-researchers attentiveness to choices in markets – understood as transactions, economists also share their concern for how the rationality of these choices tend to be distorted. Transaction costs and information asymmetries pave the way for power imbalances where consumers often end up as the weaker part.

Most of the contributions of this volume belong to a third strand of research, notably sociological consumer research. This strain of research has very much developed in the last 30 years or so, very much within a loose network of European sociologists (cf., European Sociological Association (europeansociology.org). Here, consumption is understood as more broadly entangled in the everyday life and practices of individuals, families and households. In this regard, sociologists aren't only concerned with decision-making in markets but also with the use and ultimate disposal of the products acquired. Acquisition can take place in markets but may just as well be the effect of gifting or other ways of passing goods and services through social networks. Of course, in market-based societies/economies, much acquisition is made through markets where people participate as shoppers. This is understood as a part-time role entangled with other statuses, like being a parent, and activities, like preparing for dinner (Strandbakken, 2018). The use-face of consumption is hard to distinguish from modern life itself. Consumer goods are props in the roleplays and activities of everyday life. Hence, the goods themselves are also social in the very sense of the word, carrying social scripts involving functional as well as normative aspects of use. Some of this research tangent on the humanities, where they study the goods in themselves, as cultural objects with distinct meanings and significance.

Today, this is a growing and thriving field of research, increasingly involving researchers from adjacent disciplines, like anthropology, geography and history and other parts of the world. But in sociology, it started much earlier.

CONSUMPTION IN SOCIOLOGY

Sociology has, since the formative years, had a strong production focus. There has probably also existed a rather naïve idea or 'feeling' that production is a serious and masculine affair, while consumption is superficial and feminine. Sociologists of all political leanings tend to have followed Marx in insisting on the primacy of the economic substructure, known as 'historical materialism.' It is necessary, however, to point to the rather obvious point, that *consumption is the reason why anything is produced*. A slight contempt for consumption among social critics, environmentalists and others tends to obscure this fact. Such critics also need to be reminded that 'consumption' is something more that the clothes shopping of young women. The term 'lifestyle' might seem better when we want to address the whole pattern and volume of consumption in modern countries, but the consumption term works well in conjunction with production.

Even with the aforementioned production focus, classical sociology *did* address consumption from the beginning, but this has gained less attention. Too often, contemporary discourse over consumption is dominated by economists and their focus on demand and consumer rationality. For a sociology of consumption, it is vital to transcend these perspectives, and a good starting point might be to consider some of the contributions from the founding fathers. We will single out contributions from Thorstein Veblen, Georg Simmel and Max Weber that still are theoretically interesting. Karl Marx' differentiation between people's needs and wants also remains relevant, but the concept is changing slightly because it will have to be based on a *social minimum* or sufficiency rather than a biological definition.

Veblen

The *Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of the Evolution of Institutions* (Veblen, 1899/1994) was published in 1899, and it is basically a political-polemical treatise. But the book introduces ideas and insights that are useful for analyzing some of the more irrational aspects of status competition. In a comparative perspective, it is worth noting that he compared the rich East Coast upper class with what was then regarded as primitive tribes. In an epoch strongly influenced by different versions of social Darwinism, this was a shocking approach and a very interesting use of comparative social research. Beyond this polemic, Thorstein Veblen's lasting contribution is the term *conspicuous consumption*, which remains in the vocabulary of sociologists today. Veblen's work also anticipates some themes and perspectives that appear in Bourdieu's famous study of consumption and lifestyles in *Distinction* (1984b).

Simmel

Georg Simmel's most consumption relevant contribution is his analysis the mechanisms around *Fashion* (1904), where he addresses the trickle-down effects and the interplay between differentiation and imitation between different social strata. Simmel's description of the fashion mechanism may have some similarities with Max Weber's *ideal types* (Strandbakken, 2017), or even with the 'models' used by economists. These two opposing principles transform fashion (in a broad sense of the term) into a mighty social force. Even if the term is trickle-*down*, Simmel mainly describes an upwards striving, where groups and individuals imitate and pursue lifestyles and status symbols of their superiors. The interplay between differentiation and imitation in a specific historical situation is described by the design historian Adrian Forty:

> A constant succession ow new designs was produced in small quantities for middle-class women who wished to be dressed in patterns that had not yet been reproduced on the cheaper fabrics worn by working-class women. It is hard to pin down exactly how the patterns for the middle-class differed from those for the working class and whether they indicated anything about the differences that were supposed to exist between the two classes. In any case, many fashionable designs were subsequently reproduced by the manufacturers on cheap cotton, a practice which both attracted working-class customers wanting to follow the fashion, and caused owners of dresses in the first, expensive printing of a pattern to discard them, because they had become 'common', and to buy new ones. (Forty, 1995, pp. 74–75)

If your approach to class and class conflict has only two strata, upper and lower, you have a situation where the upper only differentiates and the lower only imitates. In a more empirical and realistic model, you will have many strata, and all of the in-between groups will engage in the double praxis of imitating upwards and differentiating downwards. But the top and the bottom groups will have only one motive for their behaviour. This last observation comes from McCracken (1986, p. 94) and is not part of Simmel's article, but it is a development of a theory that remains interesting and relevant more than a century after its formulation.

Another, slightly consumption relevant contribution from Simmel is the essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903/1971), where he in a surprisingly modern language analyses the transition from slow rural to fast urban ways of life, not similar to the perspectives Walther Benjamin explores in the *Arcades Project* (Benjamin, 1999).

Weber

Max Weber was critical of his Marxist contemporaries that wanted to reduce stratification to only a question of economics. In *Economy and Society* (1978), he introduces a three-dimensional class analysis where he differentiates between wealth, honour and power. Interesting in this context is the emphasis on honourable lifestyles, connected to the idea of *Stand* or status group. The social status of the nobility was in the early modern period not based on its wealth, as it was surpassed by elements of the bourgeoisie. The nobility's superiority was signalled through its consumption and lifestyle (again rather similar to Bourdieu's

distinction between cultural and economic capital as described in *Distinction*). At the philosophical level, Marx' class theory probably is superior; ultimately status and power will result from economics, but as an empirical tool for sociological analysis, Weber's approach seems more useful.

THE CONSUMPTION THEME IN MODERN SOCIOLOGY

Prehistory

Even with the classical contributions mentioned above, the sociology of consumption is a rather more recent phenomenon. Frank Trentmann's major work *Empire of Things* (2019), with the elaborate subtitle *How We Became a World of Consumers From the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-first*, studies the consumption phenomenon through history, but the interesting academic, or partly academic, study of consumption, taking off in the 1960s, tended to concentrate on the post WWII Western societies, characterized by affluence and mass consumption.

In the beginning, studies of consumption were closely connected to the consumer movement. Two of the most interesting studies were Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed* (1965), addressing automobile safety, and Vance Packard's *The Waste Makers* (1960), about planned product obsolescence. Neither writer was trained as a sociologist, they were lawyers and journalists, respectively, but their contributions informed and guided early sociological consumer research. Packard actually worked very close to sociology; he addressed class questions in *The Status Seekers* (1959) and marketing in *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957). The critique of 'consumer society' also gained momentum from the emerging environmental consciousness, at the time exemplified by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). This early consumer sociology was oriented towards value for money, consumer rights (Kennedy, 1962), safe products, nutritious food etc. It was politically relevant, but theoretically rather underdeveloped; often based on shallow rational actor models from economics, and the empirical research often utilized quite simple quantitative common sense-based studies.

In an article from 2015, Jukka Gronow dismisses this tradition altogether, and claims that *'the sociology of consumption did not really establish itself as a recognized field of social studies until the 1980s and early 1990s'* (Gronow, 2015, p. 41). There existed, however, a parallel academic tradition, where sociologists and philosophers engaged in radical social critique inspired by the upheavals in the 1960s; a neo-Marxist sociology criticizing Western – especially Americanized lifestyles – for its superficiality, its materialism and so on, also contrasted to class differences inside nation states and the huge differences between the rich and poor nations. This early 'critical sociology' was much inspired by perspectives from the Frankfurt School; Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse and their 'critical theory'.

One shortcoming with the Frankfurt School, however, is its lack of contact with popular culture. Its practitioners, and their epigons, tended to be isolated in a kind of high culture ivory tower. This gave them an intellectual platform and a

'critical standard' but kept them out of touch with major cultural and political upheavals in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Here, the British 'cultural studies' tradition becomes relevant. Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall founded the *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies* at the University of Birmingham in 1962. Their theoretical point of departure was the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, but with one important exception:

> British cultural studies systematically rejected high/low culture distinctions and took seriously the artefacts of media culture, thus overcoming the elitism of the Frankfurt School. (Kellner, 1997, p. 144)

In the first 20 years, the Birmingham sociologists pursued a leftist political agenda; aiming at a reconstruction of Marxism and studying themes like feminism, gay liberation, working class subcultures, etc. But in the 1980s, cultural studies underwent a change, to a large degree inspired by postmodernism:

> . . .to celebrations of the popular, the pleasure of consumption and affirmation of a postmodern global culture of multiplicity and difference which lead many in cultural studies to uncritical celebration of 'popular culture'. (Kellner, 1997, p. 147)

The sociology of consumption that Gronow represents was very much born of the tension between the mundane consumer movement emphasis on use value and value for money on the one hand and a postmodern enthusiasm for symbolic value and 'signs' (Gronow, 2015). Gronow and Warde (Eds.). *Ordinary Consumption* from 2001 formulates an empirical critique of cultural studies and of a sociology of consumption that has been too obsessed with the spectacular, with individual choice, with identity and with conspicuous consumption.

THE PRACTICE THEORETICAL TURN

The concept of 'practice', and the theoretical reasonings behind it, has a long and rather complicated history in the social sciences. The list of writers who have been called practice theorists is impressing; it includes not only de Certeau, Foucault, Latour, Giddens and Bourdieu but also philosophers like Heidegger and Wittgenstein in addition to Weber and the early Marx. In our context, however, it seems more correct to start with a new set of contributions, linked to Schatzki (1996) and Reckwitz (2002). Reckwitz' definition goes like this:

> A 'practice' (Praktik) is a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249)

According to him, 'the social' is situated in the practice, and he suggests that the practice should be the smallest unit of the analysis. It is more interesting to study the practice than to study individuals. Without forgetting that the carriers of the (often uncoordinated) practices are individual human beings.

The practice-oriented sociology is often concerned with the body, its routines, etc. This might be seen as an attempt to transcend the classical western distinction between body and mind. According to Reckwitz, the body is never just an instrument that the actor must use to act (p. 251). Terms like body, bodily practices, knowledge, things and routines are central, without us claiming that these terms originated within the practice theoretical tradition. The terms are often employed, however, and often in combination.

A bodily practice, like eating with a knife and fork, dancing, skiing, etc., is a result of training and repetition. For these examples, it is more meaningful to claim that one *is* a body than that one *has* a body. You will never learn to play the guitar by memorizing where to put your fingers in the different chords, as mental knowledge, and then command your body to perform. Everybody knows this; the relevance here is that practice theory tries to be aware of and to consider it in the analyses (see also Gram-Hanssen, 2011).

Specific social practices contain or use specific forms of *knowledge*, but the kind of knowledge that is most often addressed inside practice theory is the implicit, often culturally specific 'tacit' knowledge. According to Reckwitz, even a phenomenon like falling in love presupposes some degree of knowledge about culture, about how to understand oneself and how to understand the other. This kind of knowledge is related to Giddens' non discursive, practical consciousness (Giddens, 1984a, 1984b). Again, this insight does not originate with practice theory, but it is something that practice theoretical sociology tries to take account of.

The Reckwitz quote above highlights routines. It is a matter of how practices appear to be routinized, in the interplay between bodily practices, knowledge and equipment or things. According to this perspective, routinization is the nature of social structure (Reckwitz, p. 255). The different practices use gear and artefacts adapted to the specific activities. As leisure activities, one might mention downhill skiing, golf, fishing and off-road cycling, all depending on specialized equipment. This focusing on the thing, or the product, is a focus on the social. This is also potentially a take on the questions of growth in consumption. *'The activity generates wants, rather than the other way around'* (Warde, 2005, p. 137. See also Heidenstrøm & Strandbakken, 2012, p. 39). The practices we engage in will often depend on equipment/products purchased in the market. This goes for prestigious activities like mountain climbing, gourmet cooking and violin playing too, and not only for the – in the tabloids – much despised stupefying mass consumption.

PRACTICE THEORY IN THE STUDY OF CONSUMPTION AND EVERYDAY LIFE

It is in the combination of the above-mentioned concepts and perspectives that we might identify a 'practice theoretical turn' in the sociology of consumption. Alan Warde's 2005-article *Consumption and Theories of Practice* was a turning point in this regard. Based on the insights from Schatzki and Reckwitz he searched for a new theoretical basis and a programme for the study of

consumption, its drivers and organization (p. 132).[2] He pointed to the fact that practice theory neither is individualistic nor holistic. As such, it facilitates for studies of consumption as a phenomenon between freedom and determinacy, between choice and structure.[3] Social practice theory also suits Warde's ambition of studying the ordinary and common rather than the spectacular and as such allows for considering use value and symbolic value simultaneously (after Heidenstrøm & Strandbakken, 2012, p. 37). To support such a position between economists', use value and cultural theorists' symbolic value, Warde gives this long and comprehensive definition of consumption:

> ... I understand consumption as a process whereby agents engage in appropriation and appreciation, whether for utilitarian, expressive or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information or ambience, whether purchased or not, over which the agent has some degree of discretion. (p. 137)

Warde adds that consumption is not in itself a practice, but that consumption is a moment in most practices. Much of the contemporary European sociology of consumption works inside or is heavily influenced by this practice theoretical turn. So is also several of the contributions to this volume.

COMPARATIVE CONSUMER RESEARCH

At the end of the day, all social science is comparative. You cannot study poverty without some sort of critical standard to compare it with, affluence, theoretical income and fortune equality, etc. The educational choices of girls are interesting when compared to those of boys, or compared with girls' educational choices 30 years ago, or compared with the situation in other countries. We compare across nations, across classes, across ethnicity, gender or at different times. Weber compared regions dominated by Protestants to regions dominated by Catholics. The simple point is that the isolated fact is rather meaningless until it is compared to another fact.

So, the term 'comparative sociological research' should probably be reserved for contributions where the comparative aspect is highlighted and made explicit. The most influential contribution to the sociology of consumption is beyond doubt Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984a), which was published in France in 1979. Much consumer sociology is dialogue with Bourdieu, and at least until the 'practice turn' (Warde, 2005), it seemed hard to get beyond his theoretical approach.

Bourdieu's material is mainly about the French class system in the early 1970s, most notably the consumption habits and the distribution of economic and cultural capital between different sections of the French elite. His research design, his methods (correspondence analysis) and his theoretical perspectives have been transferred to other national settings, yielding some very interesting results.