

## **Module 1: Consumer Society**

### **WEEK 2 – INTRODUCING CONSUMPTION**

#### **Chapter 8 – Consumption and Lifestyles**

*Consumer society: I see myself in my possessions*

- Living in a consumer society means people understand themselves and others through their possessions
  - Objects become physical material opportunities to objectify self – visibly express ideals to others
    - Ex, Apple: 1<sup>st</sup>, as a brand, fashionable – having latest product essential for keeping up
      - 2<sup>nd</sup>, updates and features changed – relate to superficial aspects
      - 3<sup>rd</sup>, release of integrated digital music player in phone – able to extend business
      - Purpose of product cycle – re-stimulate consumer demand so owners encouraged to upgrade purchase
        - Brand supposedly about creativity, maverick individuality, urban cool, high design values
        - In contrast, paint competitors as opposite
    - Everyday consumer goods – opportunities to play out aspects of social distinction and tastes
      - Influence how we evaluate and differentiate others
      - Markers of identity and social status explains desire to possess them

#### **Introduction**

- Materialist conditions of modern life – centred on spheres of work and economic production
  - Individuals motives – cogs in wheel of capitalist economic production
  - ‘Productionist bias’
  - Marx: modes and means of economic production influences everything else in society (culture, laws, institutions)
    - Some sociologists claims – thorough sphere of consumption (not production) to understand nature, processes, experiences of contemporary society
      - Some argues basis of society changed: from production-based economy to consumption-based
    - *Consumer culture* – refers to a society where consumption is dominant mode of social activity and organisation, to extent that we understand ourselves and others mainly as consumers of particular things
      - Expressivity
      - *Aestheticisation* – process of depicting/representing consumer goods and other commodities in artistic manner, sometimes to point of glorifying and exalting beauty above all other considerations
      - Lifestyle
      - Identity
      - Symbolisation
      - *Individualisation* – trend towards primacy of individual choice, freedom, and self-responsibility

- *Cultural turn* – refers to way cultural objects and cultural life have been seen as central to understanding society since around 1960s
  - Consumption serves purpose of constructing ‘self’ through type of ‘consumption play’
  - Making distinctions between oneself and others – thus, delineating/demarcating cultural beliefs/values
- Key change in nature of Western societies:
  - Move from subsistence-based economy to one based on consumerist, individualist principle of abundance and excess
- Georges Bataille – condition of abundance crucial to interpreting modern culture
  - Principle facet: people have to operate in culture where there are too many things, too much of everything
  - For individuals, key problem relates to individualised issues
    - Problem of consumer choice amid abundance, establishing viable social self-identity through consumption practices
    - Politics of selfhood posed through one’s own consumption practices
- Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose – argue
  - If contemporary self established/constituted through consumption practices
  - Consumption primary animator of social action – by which we come to construct and know ourselves and others

### **Key Concepts, Terms, and Issues**

- Consumption – purchase and use of goods or services
- Colin Campbell: consumption involves purchasing/using g/s AND selecting, maintaining, repairing, disposing it
  - Selection of goods – undertaken subconsciously/automatically but based on social norms, cultural learning, emotional factors, prejudices, irrationalities
  - Disposing of good – literally throwing it away or re-selling, donating, passing it to others
  - Show consumption is process over time
- Jean Baudrillard – in *structuralism* (theoretical tradition emphasising way culture organised by various underlying codes, symbols, ideas function according to linguistic rules)
  - Consumption understood as activity consisting of ‘systematic manipulation of signs’
    - Routine practice of manipulating signs/symbols in order to send messages to oneself, especially to others
  - 1<sup>st</sup>, defines not as particular act of purchase/decision-making but as mode of generic, systematic engagement with things – occur across variety of instances, irrespective of time and space
  - 2<sup>nd</sup>, not important what particular g/s consumed – serve as signs/symbols (object refer to social meaning)

- Daniel Miller – emphasises ability of any consumer object to play role in forming and delineating cultural meanings simultaneously create self and culture
  - Through meanings people give to g/s – create identity, social affiliations, lived everyday practices
  - Important: process of giving personal meaning to something one exchanged for money
    - Forming loving relationship with object: incorporating ourselves into it, letting it become part of us
- Consumerism – cultural drive to procure more consumer items, define oneself in terms of ones possessions
  - Refers to way of life where consuming things is central to experience and identity-formation
- Lifestyle – refers to choices, tastes, preferences assembled into coherent set of practices and values – mode of living
  - Not necessarily consumerist – include those that shy away from conventional modes – ‘green lifestyle’, ‘hippie’
- Materialistic – describe a person, culture, excessively occupied with accumulation and display of goods
  - Concerned with personal wealth and accumulation of goods at expense of all else

### **Theoretical Approaches to Study of Consumption**

#### *Marx and Critical Theory*

- Marxism – social theory that changes human activity (labour) determined by economic and material factors (technology, class conflict over material interests)
- Developed Marxism – *Frankfurt School*
- Marx – interested in object of consumption not practices
  - Not interested in how, why people consumed things and what they get from it
  - Interested in how commodity was central to understanding society
  - Commodity – refers to consumer object that has been purchased through economic exchange
    - Embodiment of exploited human labour – concrete manifestation of sweat, blood, energy of workers
    - Represented *alienation* (denote estrangement of workers from products of labour and loss of control felt by workers under capitalism)
  - Argued objects people routinely consume encourage them to overlook own exploited status within capitalist system
    - Engendering *false consciousness* (refer to beliefs reinforce, reproduce class inequality, usually by working class mistakenly supporting/adopting interests of upper class) within exploited working classes – focus on lure of commodity jewels
- Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno
  - Consumption and obsession with objects seen as crucial to social conservatism

- Objects of consumption promise liberation, utopian possibilities but deliver domination and zombie-like ossification
- Enslave those who possess objects – denying them autonomy, compromising human spirit – through *fetishisation* (strong, harmful obsession with particular thing/consumer object) by consumers – people lose sight of things that matter in life