CONSUMERS AND CONSUMPTION

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Abstract Consumption is a social, cultural, and economic process of choosing goods, and this process reflects the opportunities and constraints of modernity. Viewing consumption as an “institutional field,” the review suggests how consumption bridges economic and cultural institutions, large-scale changes in social structure, and discourses of the self. New technologies, ideologies, and delivery systems create consumption spaces in an institutional framework shaped by key social groups, while individual men and women experience consumption as a project of forming, and expressing, identity. Studying the institutional field requires research on consumer products, industries, and sites; on the role of consumption in constructing both the consuming subject and collective identity; and on historical transitions to a consumer society. Ethnography, interviews, and historical analysis show a global consumer culture fostered by media and marketing professionals yet subject to different local interpretations.

INTRODUCTION

Until recently, sociologists in the United States have generally ignored the topic of consumption, but they have done so at their peril. Though consuming basic goods is as ancient as human society, there is reason to believe that consumption of more elaborate goods and services—and the institutions and rituals that make this consumption possible—have assumed an overwhelming significance in modern life. Not only do sales of technologically sophisticated consumer goods like automobiles, DVD players, and personal computers make up a greater portion of the domestic economy around the world, but an increasing part of public culture is shaped by goods and services, advertisements that promote their use, and places—from shopping malls and websites to fitness centers and museum gift shops—where they are displayed, viewed, and bought. Studying consumption is an ideal bridge between research on the economy and the sociology of culture and provides new sites for examining the family, gender, and social class.

Yet aside from widespread use of Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of “cultural capital,” which includes the differentiated use of consumer goods to establish social
status, and Ritzer’s (1996) notion of “McDonaldization,” which depicts the drive to rationalize contemporary organizations by imposing a self-service format copied from the fast-food chain, most initiatives for studying consumption have come from cultural studies, feminist scholarship, and social history. The works of such social theorists as Walter Benjamin, Zygmunt Bauman, and Jean Baudrillard—which have influenced the study of modernity, culture, and consumption in Europe—are barely read by most sociologists on this side of the Atlantic. Ethnographies of consumer goods in households, and interviews with family members about those goods, are few and far between (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981, Halle 1993, Rochberg-Halton 1986). And the ethnographies of shopping in different London neighborhoods carried out by Miller (1998a, 2001) and other British anthropologists and geographers (Miller et al. 1998) are not matched by similarly detailed studies by American sociologists—unless they are employees of marketing firms.

One practical problem is that consumption is a huge topic that overlaps different institutional areas and both the public and private spheres. It is impossible to devise a single analytic framework to grasp its many historical forms and influences or the diverse theoretical perspectives that either praise or condemn it (see Slater 1997). By the same token, the division of intellectual labor among sociological fields makes it difficult to attach consumption to specific areas of the discipline.

Another problem, traceable to classical sociologists of the nineteenth century, is that consumption is broadly taken for granted and often denigrated. Above a minimal level of satisfying physical needs for food, clothing, and shelter, the desire to consume was considered by Marx to be a social need induced by capitalism: a “commodity fetish.” Although he acknowledged that men and women like to dress up and eat well, he described these acts as “animal functions” (Marx 1972, p. 60). Weber (1946) viewed consumption instrumentally rather than as a social action carrying meaning in itself. But this does not mean that he thought consumption trivial. The ability to control the use of consumer goods is an important means of marking social status in any society, and in a market society, the ability to buy goods is shared by men and women in the same market position. Significantly, Weber’s “Protestant ethic” (1958) has become a key word for referring to consumption as hedonism, pragmatically placed in the service of religious beliefs about salvation.

Simmel (1997) was the first of the classical sociologists to discuss both the sensuality and attraction to novelty that supports mass consumption and to suggest that consumers’ apparently inconsequential behavior—paying attention to fashion and shopping—is a common expression of modern social life, especially in cities (Simmel 1957). Durkheim, however, put forward a darker theme that underlies much of the contemporary criticism of—and perhaps aversion to studying—consumption. If modern society, and especially the economy, unleashes consumers’ boundless desires, it destroys the moral basis of social order (Slater 1997, pp. 74–77).

None of these classical theorists offered empirical demonstrations of their ideas about consumption. They relied on generalized, anthropological observations to support meta-historical ideas. They also placed less emphasis on consumption than
on other areas of social life, beginning with production, that were more prominent in their time. By contrast, Thorstein Veblen—a social critic but an economist by profession—was the first theorist to discuss consumption in terms of specific social practices in the United States. But his work on “the leisure class” (Veblen 1959) also uses general, anthropological observations instead of systematic empirical research. Moreover, Veblen’s work signals two issues that may also explain why sociologists have held research on consumers in low regard: a moral disapproval of “status consumption” and the preeminent role in consumption that is played by women. From the beginning, then, consumption has been viewed as both amoral and gendered.

A third problem—most vexing for academic sociologists—is that, since the 1930s, applied sociologists and psychologists have dominated consumer research, and there is little crossover between the academic and applied domains. One will look in vain for articles about consumption in the major American sociological journals, and most academic sociologists do not read the journals of consumer research. Market researchers’ pragmatic interest in pegging consumption to specific purchases, and in reducing consumers to typological versions of “economic man,” is only beginning to be challenged by a more complex understanding of how men and women use consumption to construct social relationships and how consumption is shaped by the “supply side” of economic institutions and culture. But again, it is mainly historians and anthropologists, rather than sociologists, who have addressed these issues. This suggests that the study of consumption has always been multidisciplinary in scope.

Using sociology, then, in a broad rather than a disciplinary sense, we find that most sociological studies of consumption are bracketed, on the one hand, by structural changes in economy, infrastructure, and society that create a system of mass consumption and, on the other hand, by individual changes in values, attitudes, and behavior that result in a consumer culture. Consumer culture is produced, as well, by agents who work directly in the corporate economy as managers, marketers, and advertising “creatives”; by independent “brokers” who analyze and criticize consumer products; and by dissidents who initiate alternative responses to the mass consumption system. This broad framework allows us to consider consumption as an institutional field, i.e., a set of interconnected economic and cultural institutions centered on the production of commodities for individual demand. Even within this framework, there are many different approaches that run along a spectrum from specific, empirical studies to broad, speculative essays. In practice, it is often difficult to separate interpretation from speculation because data on consumers’ attitudes are often ambiguous, there is little agreement on analytic frameworks, and the researcher frequently takes on the role of moralist, or at least social critic.

In this review, we begin by examining the basic material setting of the institutional field in studies of the development of specific products, industries, and consumption sites. We move on to consider consumption and the social construction of both the consuming subject and such forms of collective identity as ethnicity,
holidays, and national and transnational citizenship. We then turn to the broader question of the transition to consumer society, specifically in the shift from state socialism to a market economy. We end by outlining an emerging sociological approach to studying consumption as an institutional field through multifaceted empirical research on products, texts, and sites that both socialize and serve consumers. Although our approach focuses on only some aspects of consumption—ignoring, for present purposes, such topics as the meaning of things—we think that it holds promise for bridging economic sociology and the sociology of culture (see Zelizer 2004) and for helping us to understand how men, women, and children in modern societies become consumers.

CONSUMER PRODUCTS, INDUSTRIES, AND SITES

Contemporary studies of consumer products and sites date from the 1970s and early 1980s—the very period when the more developed economies of the world were shifting from manufacturing to "postindustrial" production, and consumption was becoming a more visible factor in both the creative destruction of the landscape (Zukin 1991) and the conscious reshaping of the self (Featherstone 1991). At first, the importance of consumption was approached historically, from the rediscovery and English translation of Benjamin's (1999) research on the Paris Arcades of the 1840s, which mainly reached the United States through the filter of British social criticism, to social histories of the late-nineteenth-century department store (Miller 1981, Williams 1982) and early-twentieth-century advertising industry (Ewen 1976). All these studies use archival sources—descriptions of city streets, fashions, and shop windows in Benjamin's work, and memoirs, company records, advertisements, and industry publications in the other cases—to uncover the roots of modern consumer culture. As a whole, this work highlights the innovations of mass consumption: the gradual eclipse of small merchants and peddlers by large, well-capitalized firms; the setting of fixed prices that removed shopping from informal norms of bargaining; the display of piles of goods from distant regions, which transformed abundance into a novelty and made novelty abundant.

Although not theorized in these terms, the research documents the gradual development of an institutional field of mass consumption made up of consumer products, texts, and sites. New retail stores, advertisements, popular magazines, and daily newspapers all brought consumers into contact with goods and tended to make the consumer a powerful role model. To the extent that it is theorized, this work strongly suggests that mass consumption was produced by manipulating consumers' desires to be well dressed, good looking, and beloved; to surround themselves with visions of beauty; and to surrender common sense and sobriety to individual dreams of self-enhancement. Leach's (1993) archival study of the John Wanamaker department store in New York and Philadelphia reaches the height of this form. But, unlike Veblen's critique of the leisure class and contemporary criticism of status consumption, Leach refuses to blame consumers. He analyzes
the department store’s use of new building materials like plate glass and electric light as “strategies of enticement,” and, by examining memoirs, speeches, and private communications, he connects retail entrepreneurs to large banks, universities, and art museums—the urban “circuits of power” that dominated both economy and culture. By making standardized consumer goods visible to all, Leach argues, department stores “democratized desire,” while motivating men and women to buy.

Feminist historians emphasize the ambiguity of department stores (and later supermarkets) for women’s independence (Bowly 1985, 2000; Nava 1997). Following Emile Zola’s fictional depiction of Parisian department stores as capitalist snares of desire, they describe these consumption sites as manipulating women by providing a wide array of sensory delights. But by providing a reason—shopping—for women to appear unescorted in public, as well as arranging safe spaces like rest rooms and tea rooms where women could gather or sit alone without fear of being molested by men, especially men who had been drinking alcohol, department stores also made it possible for women to leave the domestic space of the home and lay claim to the center of the city (Wolff 1985).

These examinations of the roots of consumer culture are based mainly on a cultural analysis of texts and images. Researchers scrutinize existing photographs and descriptions of visual displays in stores and shop windows for visual signs of manipulating consumers’ wills; they read novels for detailed descriptions of such changes in character; and they use early advertisements and strategic statements by industry pioneers as evidence for the intention to create ideal—i.e., avid—consumers. But this perspective can be placed in an even wider framework. Innovations in production technology around 1900 suggest a broad effort by business leaders to control the flow of goods and information, as well as consumers’ minds (Beniger 1986). Though increasing capacity in mass production industries pressed companies to try any means—including advertising—to sell their goods, it is not sufficient to explain the rise of mass consumption by demonstrating the manipulation of consumers’ wills (Martin 1999). The quantitative growth of mass consumption also reflects qualitative changes in demographics, new trends of social and geographical mobility, and the growing appeal of standardized goods as badges of both democratization and social status (Schudson 1984). In other words, a sociological analysis of consumer culture requires not just a reading of advertisements and appeals to buy goods; it demands familiarity with the standard tools of social history as well as a careful look at the evolution of specific products.

When applied subtly, and with a broad grasp of historical detail, the study of consumer products is both fascinating in itself and indicative of links between cultural representations, business strategies, and social practices. Schudson’s (1984) careful study of the growth of cigarette consumption around 1900 makes a case for a multidimensional social and cultural analysis of consumer products in their social context. In his analysis, Schudson (1984) considers the increasing availability of—and ease of using—cigarettes in contrast to other forms of tobacco; the social effects of World War I, including the return of veterans who had smoked
during military duty overseas; emerging pressures on the use of time during the workday; and changes in women’s public roles and social status. He concludes that both standardization of the product and democratization of public life led to the cigarette’s pre-eminent place for nearly a century in American consumer culture. Taking account of all these changes, Schudson explains the rise of modern consumer culture in one society.

The anthropologist Sidney Mintz (1985) likewise looks at changes in both production and consumption to explain the emergence of sugar as a key consumer good—along with alcohol and tea—in modern Britain. For Mintz, however, these two spheres—production and consumption—form two ends of a single, multinational “commodity chain” (although he does not use the term; see Hughes & Reimer 2003): Sugar links slave, and later free, labor on plantations in the Caribbean with the English working class. Looking at aggregate data on sugar production and consumption in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as at changes in labor practices on both sides of the Atlantic, he explains the rise of sugar in the British diet as a means of controlling workers at two ends of a colonial, capitalist economy. But, as with cigarettes, consumers’ acceptance of sugar would not have occurred without broad cultural changes in the use of time, women’s roles, and the opportunity to use sugar in new social rituals—at teatime, for example, and during a separate course at meals called dessert.

Recent studies of “gourmet” coffees in our time (Roseberry 1996) and of the humble tin can in an earlier era (Naylor 2000) continue to connect the two ends of a commodity chain—mainly, in consuming regions of the northern hemisphere and producing regions of the southern hemisphere—by relating changes in consumers’ tastes to the business strategies of producers, exporters, and importers. Although this creates a paradigm for global studies of consumption that fits both everyday experience and structural interdependencies, it also requires attention to initiators outside the realm, strictly speaking, of both production and consumption: product designers, trade groups, marketers, and merchants (du Gay et al. 1997, Molotch 2003).

Producers’ motivations, moreover, may be multidimensional—and so may their modus operandi. When a group of British sociologists studied the development of the Sony Walkman, they used company documents, memoirs, and journalistic accounts to illustrate Sony’s desire to innovate, lower costs, and appear as a global company—and also Sony’s ability to learn from consumers’ behavior (du Gay et al. 1997). Their study situates the product not only in a sea change of cultural representations—primarily seen in advertisements for the Walkman—but also in organizational practices of the firm and in young people’s social practices of self-expression, individuality, and sociality. According to their model, then, production and consumption are not two poles of a commodity chain, but continually interacting processes in a “cultural circuit,” where products both reflect and transform consumers’ behavior.

This kind of detailed research highlights the complex interdependence of consumption with its social context, a point that is often downplayed by studies of
cultural representations. Yet what gives the study of the Sony Walkman sociological weight—in contrast to Molotch’s (2003) multidimensional discussion of twentieth-century product design—is its critical engagement with questions of culture, age, and social class, as well as with the relative power of individuals and multinational corporations. A similar engagement underlies Frank’s (1997) study of the rise of “hip” fashion for men in the United States in the late 1960s and Parr’s (1999) work on the development of modern household appliances and furniture in Canada after World War II. Unlike economic sociologists, Frank and Parr do not frame their research according to an abstract model of the development of markets; instead, as cultural historians, they are concerned with step-by-step processes of changing consumers’ attitudes toward obsolescence. How do consumers begin to desire new consumer goods or fashions? And when do they stop desiring them and replace them with others?

Both Frank and Parr demonstrate manufacturers’ strong motivation to persuade consumers to buy new products. Like earlier studies of the U.S. automobile industry, their work uses strategic statements by business executives to show how consumer products companies foster “the organized creation of dissatisfaction” (Steele 1993) with existing styles and models. They carry out a close reading of the literature of their respective industries—focusing on the editorial content of the trade press and popular magazines, as well as advertisements—and, in Frank’s case, interviews with participants who are still alive.

The correspondence between the appliance and auto industries is not coincidental. Parr (1999) documents how, from the 1930s to the 1950s, companies changed refrigerator models every year and copied automobile styling down to the last detail; they planned both the products’ physical obsolescence and their “emotional obsolescence” in consumers’ eyes (see also Ewen 1999). Although the auto industry for many years tried to appeal to men, appliance manufacturers appealed to women consumers. Yet the almost entirely male manufacturers ignored women’s concerns. According to Parr’s interpretation of consumer surveys and magazine articles from the 1950s, women wanted fewer product changes in, and easier physical access to, their refrigerators and stoves, but they were defeated by male executives, designers, and sales clerks and alienated by the dominant machine aesthetic of the time. Certainly there was a large latent demand for consumer products after World War II, but Parr dissects the postwar boom with a critical attention to gender, corporate power, links between art museums and product design, and national (i.e., Canadian) interest in encouraging innovative industrial design. This is what we mean by studying the evolution of consumer products in their social context.

Frank (1997) studies how the men’s clothing industry succeeded in socializing consumers to the same idea of emotional obsolescence during the 1960s. Faced with declining sales of men’s clothes and an apparent male disdain for fashion, manufacturers and store owners adapted to the growing desire, especially among the young, for creative self-expression. While the trade press urged manufacturers to induce a more rapid turnover of goods by a more rapid creation of styles, advertisements exaggerated fears of conformity and praised creativity. Clothing,
as well as soft drinks and cars, were presented as a choice of the young, the wild, and the creative. Frank carries out a shrewd, qualitative content analysis of industry advertisements, but he also compares these ads with strategic statements by company executives in the trade press, as well as with prior organizational changes in the advertising industry—the “creative revolution” of the early 1960s—to document the social construction of the ideal type of the “hip” consumer. The object of Frank’s study—the integration of a subculture model of “cool” into the heart of capitalism—is so taken for granted today, it is widely assumed to have spread upward into industry with the force of a grassroots cultural shift. But Frank’s archival research shows how creativity was used by the advertising and consumer products industries to convince consumers to buy. A briefer but similar study of change in women’s fashions during the 1960s and the resulting eclipse of department stores by designer boutiques indicates that manufacturers and store owners were caught unprepared by a demand for individualistic styles (Zukin 2004), but this does not detract from the explanatory power of Frank’s analysis. In the end, the evolution of many consumer products depends on power relations among producers, the quest for self-definition and social status among consumers, and floating cultural representations of “cool.”

These product biographies and studies of consumer industries highlight the interconnections between production and consumption. They also demonstrate how consumers’ desires for goods are socially constructed—partly through industry-fostered changes in cultural models and strategic practices of marketing (“supply”), and partly through changing demographics, shifting means of self-expression, and new social practices (“demand”). A more speculative view, however, relates this demand for goods to changes in the consuming subject.

THE CONSUMING SUBJECT

In contrast to specific histories of consumer products and industries, a broad historical view links the rise of consumer culture with the modern creation of a “choosing self” (Slater 1997, p. 59). Accounts of modernity trace the development of this new self to the process of individualization (Bauman 2000, Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002), in which identity shifts from a fixed set of characteristics determined by birth and ascription to a reflexive, ongoing, individual project shaped by appearance and performance. The roots of this shift lie in urbanization and industrialization, which open access to an array of new goods and experiences, while at the same time permeating the core of the family and extending interdependencies. With people living more rational, anonymous lives, traditionally stable frameworks for group and individual identity—such as family, religion, class, and nationality—owe weaker and are modified or abandoned. The individual is then free to choose his or her path toward self-realization, taking on an opportunity and obligation once reserved for the elite. This freedom, however, comes at the cost of security; without fixed rules, the individual is constantly at risk of getting it wrong, and anxiety attends
each choice. Simply put, modernity’s legacy is a mass crisis of identity: we are each faced with the need to “become what one is” (Bauman 2000, p. 32).

Complementing this theoretically driven account of the contemporary subject are empirical studies of advertising, magazines, and other advice and self-help manuals, all of which offer means of coping with the dilemma of producing one’s identity. Historical content analyses of advertising in the early twentieth century note an increasing emphasis on self-realization (Lears 1983), the importance of first impressions (Marchand 1985), and the viability of improving oneself through consumption. Pendergast’s (2000) social-historical study of the content of popular men’s magazines from 1900 to 1950 highlights how the efforts of editors, writers, advertisers, and readers intersected in the production of new representations of masculinity, as well as a new medium that combined advice, amusement, and appeals to buy. Against the backdrop of changes in the worlds of work and leisure (and the magazine industry), Pendergast’s careful reading of changes in advertising and editorial content in such magazines as Vanity Fair and Ebony is strengthened by an attention to the role of the producers of such content, as evidenced in memoirs, autobiographies, and business correspondence. Tracing the long-term transition from a Victorian, work-oriented masculinity (and, for black men, a masculinity defined through the demand for access to jobs and rights), to a modern, consumerist masculinity, Pendergast demonstrates how products and texts act together to create a consuming subject.

Issues of identity and consumption converge in the concepts of “taste” and “lifestyle,” that is, systems of practices through which individuals classify themselves by their classification of consumer goods as more or less desirable, acceptable, or valuable (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 169–75). Using survey data of French consumers’ possessions and preferences (e.g., of artists, styles of dress, and cooking), Bourdieu demonstrates how knowledge of status codes, or rules of legitimacy, allows consumers to display “good” taste and thus establish their distinction. Contrary to arguments that categories such as social class have lost meaning in post-traditional, postmodern societies, Bourdieu’s research shows how taste is deeply rooted in class position and relative access to economic, cultural, and social capital. If rich, well-educated consumers prefer one kind of art, bread, or travel to that preferred by workers, farmers, or cultured but less-affluent professors, then lifestyles reconfigure (and disguise)—rather than replace—class positions as patterns of consumption (Grusky & Wheeldon 2001, Tomlinson 2003). Impressionist observations of other consumers’ choices in their intimate surroundings—a preference for “shabby chic” décor (Halnon 2002), for example, and the worn patina of antiques (McC racken 1990, pp. 41–43)—confirm that tastes for specific kinds of consumer goods are implicitly socialized by social class and status or are consciously learned as a means of integration into new social groups (for an opposing view on art in the home, however, see Halle 1993).

Simply mapping Bourdieu’s (1984) analysis of class and taste onto today’s consumer culture in the United States is problematic, not only because of different relations of class identity to local culture, but also because much has changed
in France and elsewhere since the survey data was collected in the 1960s. The commodification of culture has intensified, attention to design has become a normal part of the production process, and design aesthetics have converged such that the same “look” is sold across price categories (see Gartman 1991), making it more difficult to draw a distinct line between a (working class) taste for material function and a (bourgeois) taste for symbolic form. However, Bourdieu’s work remains useful for its emphasis on the role of “cultural intermediaries” (Bourdieu 1984, p. 359)—the growing ranks of those involved in media, marketing, advertising, tourism, fashion, and other forms of providing symbolic goods and services.

With its attention to self-improvement, and the time, money, and energy to devote to mastering status codes, this new middle class exemplifies the consuming self (Bourdieu 1984, Featherstone 1991, Wynne 1998). After all, choices in appearance and behavior have significant, practical implications for people who work in services and cultural industries. At the very least, their occupational success requires the cultivation of an appropriate “package” through various “body projects” (Shilling 1993), such as dieting, working out, undergoing plastic surgery, and developing a fashionable, personal style.

In her research on career women and the consumption of fashion, Entwistle (2000) examines “power dressing” as a strategic mode of self-presentation. Through interviews with women, content analysis of dress manuals, and an attention to the retail strategies of fashion designers, Entwistle demonstrates how the skirt or trouser suit provides a solution to the problem of identity for professional women, creating an aura of authority through an appropriate appearance (neither overly masculine nor sexual) that negotiates—and ultimately reproduces—gender codes. At the same time, this work “uniform,” and the manuals describing how best to assemble it, are a means to cope with the anxiety of choosing from the number of fashion options available to women: The rules of power dressing offer women the security of knowing that they will “look the part.” Interviews with image consultants and their clients (Wellington & Bryson 2001) show how “experts” are used to deal with the pressure of creating an appropriate appearance, particularly for those in frontline service work, where a personal image represents the image of the corporation.

Therapeutic texts and services help to cope with the anxiety of identity production not only by changing but also by affirming the self. Interviews with readers of self-help books, for example, reveal their desire to have their problems and experiences recognized and labeled by an expert, and thus rendered normal (Cameron 2000, Simonds 1992; see also Miller 2001, p. 16). By combining interviews with discourse analyses and patterns of consumption, such research reveals how individuals learn to negotiate the institutional field of consumption.

Studies of the social formation of the consuming subject often lead to speculation about the political implications of consumer culture. There is a perceived ideological fit between the self-managing, enterprising, choosing self and the model citizen of neoliberal societies who shoulders the responsibility for maintaining social order through his or her “good” choices (Cronin 2000, Entwistle 2000,
Slater 1997). In addition, there is the troubling capacity of consumer industries to commodify—and disarm—dissenting voices, recruiting issues of women’s empowerment, environmental sustainability, and racial equality into the service of product promotion, thus reducing social justice to the freedom to choose between products (Cohen 2003, Talbot 2000).

Social theorists have critiqued consumers’ much-vaulted “freedom of choice” by pointing out that consumption is presented not as an option but as a duty of the consumer-citizen (Baudrillard 1998, p. 80; Bourdieu 1984, p. 367). There is, moreover, a growing gap between the right to choose one’s identity and the ability to control one’s life (Bauman 2000, p. 38). The illusory nature of consumer freedom is further supported by academic studies of marketing, public relations, and consumer research (Ewen 1996, 1999; Turow 1998). The archival research by Miller & Rose (1997) on the work of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in England in the 1950s and 1960s shows how market researchers, influenced by new psychological conceptions of consumption, attempted to direct or “mobilize” consumers’ choices by forging intricate, intimate connections between specific product attributes (such as the texture of new, softer toilet paper) and human passions, fears, and values (such as the desire for middle-class comfort).

These critical views of marketing and the social construction of the consuming subject contradict the “lifestyle” paradigm of consumer research that developed from the 1960s to the 1980s and still dominates marketing today. Market researchers trained in anthropology and psychology began to realize that demographics—socioeconomic characteristics like social class, income, and education—did not adequately indicate differences in consumers’ behavior or, more seriously for client firms, predict choices of products. They tried to capture differences in consumers’ preferences by creating new typologies based on “psychographic” analysis of consumers’ answers to survey questions about their self-concepts and their preferences on a broad array of topics—e.g., spouses, household arrangements, pets, leisure time—that have no direct connection with products. These raw data are often refined by focus groups led by a market researcher. The resulting clusters of attitudes are defined as lifestyle values, and market researchers use them as a proxy for consumers’ product choices (Turow 1998, Zukin 2004).

Both researchers and client firms claim that values and lifestyles surveys (VALS) are an effective strategy for increasing sales—and, in the case of political clients, for winning elections. They develop more refined typologies of consumers than standard socioeconomic categories like age, gender, and social class by isolating different clusters of attitudes and behavior within these categories. But they also divide communities and nations into market segments, appealing to a smaller number of common symbols, and—by constant references in the media—reifying these differences (Turow 1998). Moreover, by “disaggregating and reconstituting” consumer types (Applbaum 2003), VALS abstract consumers from both their social context and the integrity of their individual lives.

A more labor-intensive research strategy—also directed at product choices—aims to determine consumers’ “relationships” with the brands they buy. Assuming
that consumers’ loyalty to specific brands is based on emotional and family histories as well as performance, researchers carry out intensive interviews with consumers about all aspects of their childhood and present lives. Like VALS, this research strategy tries to determine what consumers want out of life—and how their “brand portfolios provide meaning to the self” (Fourier 1998). Unlike VALS, however, this research uses interviews, focus groups, card sorts, and other laboratory techniques developed by social psychologists to construct typologies based not on self-declared attitudes but on emotional attachments, behavioral ties, and cognitive beliefs. Although this kind of research does acknowledge the complexity of individual choices and the integrity of individual lives, to many sociologists—especially in the academy—it suffers from the instrumentality of treating the consuming subject as a buying machine.

CONSUMPTION AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

The most productive studies situate consumer culture with respect to three levels of analysis: changes in demographic, geographic, and social structure; interventions by marketing media; and developing discourses about the consuming subject or individual identity. This framework applies just as well to the role of consumer culture in forming expressions of collective identity such as ethnicity, holidays, and national or transnational citizenship.

In a study of the social construction of Latino identity in the United States today, the anthropologist Arlene Davila (2001) examines the production and consumption of media images of Hispanics in Spanish-language television, print advertisements, and TV commercials. Based on interviews with Latino marketing professionals in New York, Chicago, and San Antonio, and on focus groups with a cross-section of Latino consumers in New York City, she finds that Latinos are sensitive to traditional bias against dark skin tones both in their home countries and in the United States and that they are ambivalent about being identified as Latino by their ability to speak Spanish—an ability that ignores both the facility in English among the second generation and differences in vocabulary and connotation among Hispanics from different countries. Like studies of English-speaking immigrants from the Caribbean, Davila’s research shows how Latino immigrants retain their national identities as if they were ethnic identities; she also shows how media-produced images of Latinos in the United States de-emphasize social class differences by implying that all Latinos are poor. Davila’s interviews also indicate that both Latino marketers and consumers are ambivalent about the media’s role in reproducing traditional Latin stereotypes—such as the virginal mother and the hot-tempered lover—to sell goods. Moreover, both marketers and consumers are suspicious of Hispanics of different national origins: Cuban-run marketing firms, like Cuban consumers, are often disdainful of Mexican or Dominican competitors, and other groups feel the same. But Latinos’ “identity politics” also reflect the attitudes they encounter in the larger American society. According to Davila, Latinos often
feel—and are made to feel—under suspicion for being both too ethnic and not ethnic enough.

Although Davila's study is limited to the production and consumption of media images, it suggests several important points about consumer culture. Not least, it demonstrates the importance of consumer culture for producing new ethnic identities. Yet the effects of consumer culture are not uniform. On the one hand, Latino consumers compare media images of Latinos with their own experience, and they reject both the images and the products they represent if they contradict their experience. On the other hand, like all consumers, Latinos absorb and internalize some aspects of the media images and think of themselves as connected to the brands and styles of consumption that they promote. Whether Latinos make these connections consciously or not, they are selecting ethnic markers on the basis of a highly mediated consumer culture. And, as with African Americans (Lamont & Molnar 2001), the difficulties of making these choices in a white-dominated society are echoed in interviews with the Latino marketing professionals who create many of the images.

Although many media images suggest Latinos are poor, African Americans have historically been portrayed as having less money than whites but being more conspicuous consumers. Partly to test this stereotype, the anthropologist Elizabeth Chin (2001) did ethnographic research among a small number of working-class African American families in a northeastern city. She did not specifically investigate the reception of consumer culture among her subjects; rather, she observed how they shopped for gifts and other consumer goods and compiled inventories of their individual and household possessions. The low level of purchases and possessions that she sees in "Newhallville" dramatically contrasts with the media image of African Americans, especially teens, as avid consumers. She relates the lack of consumption, however, to low household incomes, the scarcity of small stores in the mainly segregated neighborhood where her respondents live, and the suspicion black teenagers—like all teens, but more so—arouse when they go shopping in a suburban mall. In an experiment, Chin provides her teenage respondents with a small amount of cash to shop at the mall and finds that they mainly purchase practical items.

This sort of ethnography—including both individual interviews and group discussions—corrects the impression that consumers, especially consumers from ethnic minorities, are duped by the dominant consumer culture. It contradicts the media image of some ethnic minorities as overwhelmingly interested in conspicuous consumption. It negates, as well, the myth that mass consumption levels racial hierarchies because "money knows no color." Chin does not directly confront how these teenagers interpret the media image; neither does she investigate whether they think about consumer goods even though they cannot afford to buy them. Nonetheless, watching consumers in action—and examining the purchases they really make—confirms the surprisingly strong rational core of consumption, despite the temptations of stores, the pressure of peers, and the pervasive media image of "luxury fever" (Frank 1999; see also Zukin 2004). Although ethnographic
research is always carried out on a small scale, the intensity of detail that it evokes is powerful enough to dislodge common assumptions about consumers.

These findings are confirmed by Zukin’s (2004) in-depth interviews with working-class, black, and Hispanic consumers in New York City. As with Chin’s ethnography, a single anecdote about discrimination experienced by a dark-skinned, male shopper at Tiffany does not prove any social science theory; however, when it is told with a wealth of personal detail and interpreted against a historical background of discrimination against black consumers, the story provides a critical view of how the experience of consumption—in this case, shopping in an exclusive store—helps to construct ethnic identity both within a group and in the larger society. Zukin’s work also includes focus groups with black and Hispanic teenage consumers and their mothers. As in Chin’s study, what they say about shopping contradicts media images of their conspicuous consumption. Most approach shopping rationally—one teenage boy makes a list of clothes he needs before he goes to a store and another goes to outlet malls outside the city—and all are tempted by, but do not always succumb to, brand-name logos. Davila’s, Chin’s, and Zukin’s studies show that small-scale ethnographic research and traditional, in-depth interviews yield important insights into the formation of ethnic identity through consumption.

The studies we have discussed so far place consumption against a background of structural changes. Davila’s research, for example, refers to increased immigration of Latinos to the United States since 1985. But this is not the only context of their development as consumers. In their home countries, men and women enter the mass consumption system through remittances of goods and money from overseas, free trade agreements, and the growth of multinational retail chains like Wal-Mart. New flows of goods and satellite-based media, and the global expansion of brand-name franchises, create a transnational discourse of consumer culture.

Similar structural changes accompanied the development of consumer culture in the United States. Religious and communal holidays provided sites for new social and cultural practices, which yoked consumerism—mainly gift buying—to older beliefs about, and expressions of, collective identity. Historical studies show how, in a burgeoning consumer culture, mainstream religious holidays and other cultural rituals passed from their origins in carnivals and communal rites, through Christianity (or another major religion), to massive campaigns of marketing.

Nissenbaum (1997) uses reports in the popular press, changes in legislation, seasonal songs and traditions, and other archival sources to trace the contested emergence, in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, of the modern form of Christmas, with its strong domestic focus. Nissenbaum counters jeremiads about the commercial corruption of Christmas in our time by drawing attention to the mutual reinforcement of Christmas rituals and consumer culture in the past. Structural changes—including changing conceptions of, and values associated with, domesticity—intersected with interventions by media and manufacturers in the creation of a holiday shopping season (for an account of Macy’s role in shaping the Thanksgiving Day parade, see Leach 1993).
In a different way, anthropologists examine the tension in Christmas between, on the one hand, family and religious values and, on the other, commercialism. Ethnographic and historical research suggests that Christmas gift giving is a complex process of resolving the conflicts between the family and economy. The gift transforms the abstract commodity into an expression of love and a means of producing and maintaining kin relationships, while Christmas shopping—the process of wrestling significant gifts from the impersonal world of the mall—affirms the family’s collective identity against the backdrop of an anonymous market economy (Carrier 1993; see also Miller 2001). Similarly, receiving gifts “from Santa” and “playing Santa” for oneself allow adults to fulfill their desires for luxurious goods without feeling guilty about being acquisitive (Belk 1993).

Christmas consumerism is also implicated in the production of new forms of collective identity. Research on Christmas in Japan (Moeran & Skov 1993) looks at Christmas advertising, store displays, magazines, and catalogs, coupled with ethnographic observations, to explore the holiday’s role not in constructing family-oriented domesticity, but romantic love for young couples. Products (special gifts, fashions) and sites (hotels, restaurants) provide means to produce the identity of a romantic couple through Christmas-themed dates, while Christmas brochures and advertising serve as “manuals for consumerism” (Moeran & Skov 1993, p. 129), educating consumers in how to celebrate the event. Such research indicates that the materialism of Christmas consumption is more complex than an outcome of marketing hype because it passes through the formation of collective identities. Moreover, the globalization of consumer culture requires attention to local media, contexts, and identities.

The mediated discourse of consumer culture provides a symbolic language—increasingly, a global language—for men and women, teens and children, to think about their needs. The Latin American anthropologist and cultural critic Nestor Garcia Canclini (2001) believes that this may even be “good for thinking,” because consumers are well aware of the various distinctions conferred by the use and possession of different commodities. “To consume,” then, “is to participate in an arena of competing claims for what society produces and the ways of using it” (Garcia Canclini 2001, p. 39). Examining electoral campaigns in Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, Garcia Canclini hears politicians promising voters that their macroeconomic policies will maintain the standard of living and access to consumer goods that voters desire. He sees voters protesting policies that restrict credit to buy cars, televisions, and household appliances. In this dialogue, politics and state policies further “the complicity of consumption and citizenship”—which may integrate a public for social justice as well as divide it for selfish ends.

Garcia Canclini is interested in cultural consumption and the use of media images in Latin American cities. Examining surveys of consumers’ use of public spaces and participation in cultural festivals, he finds that the spread of a transnational discourse of consumer culture tends to reduce interest, especially among young people, in traditional forms of culture. Striking—but not unexpected, in view of American practice—is the preference of young people in Bogota and
São Paulo for hanging out in shopping centers and metro stations instead of in churches, plazas, cafés, or (in Bogota) bakeries (Garcia Canclini 2001, p. 73). It is not that consumption spaces are unimportant to older people; it is that young people have adapted to—and adopted—more privatized consumption spaces as a common public space. Yet that does not mean that they all uncritically accept the discourse of consumer culture promoted by Starbucks, Wal-Mart, and the mall. Traditional consumer products, texts, and sites may themselves encourage a more romantic, and less critical, view of the world. Certainly in earlier years, traditional consumer culture downplayed social class differences, fostered national unity, and encouraged Latin Americans to buy domestic products. Consequently, Garcia Canclini calls for reinterpretation of both traditional and new consumer cultures, with particular ethnographic attention to consumers’ participation in the “globalized networks of symbolic production and circulation [where] trends in art, publishing, advertising, and fashion are set” (2001, p. 90).

Whereas Garcia Canclini studies consumers’ participation in these global networks as part of a process of changing political ideologies, another anthropologist—Kalman Applbaum (2003)—studies producers’ participation in creating the networks themselves. Applbaum interviewed high-level marketing managers in American-owned, transnational consumer products companies about their business strategies and the way they think about consumers around the world. He then compared their behavior and views with the North American business literature on globalization, especially with articles published in the *Harvard Business Review*. Like the VALS paradigm of market research, marketing managers tend to reduce consumers to buying machines and to abstract preferences for specific “lifestyles” as a proxy for choices of consumer goods. Moreover, as our discussion of Garcia Canclini suggests, marketing managers in transnational firms assume that all consumers around the world aspire to an “American” model of consumer society as the basis of their needs and desires. The marketing managers understand this model to represent a universal goal of modernization, democracy, and progress—and their marketing strategies aim to eliminate national, cultural, and ethnic differences in the pursuit of a universal consumer culture. Thus, in interviews with Applbaum, senior managers discussed their goal of providing uniform value to customers across the globe. In practice, however, delivering consistent value and achieving global presence tend to mean corporate ownership of a global brand (such as Coca Cola, Heineken, or Pampers) that is sold in exactly the same way, worldwide. The path to globalization, then, is also the path to corporate profitability, with the discourse of consumer culture providing a means toward realizing the “political project” of globalization.

Clearly, ethnographic research and in-depth interviews provide the most cogent base for generalizing about the role of global consumer culture in forming collective identities. Not just the purchase of goods but also the whole experience of using media, sites, and texts of consumption must be observed, recorded, and analyzed. Yet as Miller’s (1998b) important essay comparing Trinidadians’ use of Coca Cola and other, indigenous soft drinks points out, it is important not to
overestimate the power of either a "global brand" or global consumer culture. Careful observations, with attention to specific social contexts, yield a nuanced, and even an ambivalent, view. Consumer culture certainly provides a universal toolkit, a material and symbolic repertoire, for expressing collective identities. But consumer culture provides tools for resistance as well as for integration and adaptation. The "doo rag" worn around the head by young men, both black and white, in the United States in the early 2000s may express a subcultural identity of rebellion or ethnic pride, subverting the cultural pressure for hair straightening that many African Americans encounter. But if the doo rag is a sign of resistance to white-dominated consumer society, it also contradicts a strong aesthetic preference within black consumer culture, and denies the achievements of Mme. C.J. Walker, an early twentieth-century entrepreneur of hair products in the black community (Peiss 1998, Weems 2000). By the same token, using elements of global culture may have more subtle political meanings than at first appear. As Garcia Canclini (2001) suggests, listening to American rock music in Latin America may be politically more progressive than listening to traditional ballads, which foster a populist view favored by earlier, undemocratic governments. And consumers who celebrate holidays by shopping for gifts may go to thrift shops or sales instead of buying heavily advertised brands at full price for conspicuous, status consumption.

TRANSITIONS TO A CONSUMER SOCIETY

Most writers interpret consumer society as a distinctive product of modernity, yet the timing of its development and its social, cultural, and economic forms vary across societies, time periods, and regions of the world. Certainly we can identify a "generalized shift" in social practices and mentality (Appadurai 1996, p. 72) that unleashes desires to express individuality, directs these desires to consumer products, and creates new spaces where these products can be sampled, purchased, and enjoyed. Historically, these changes depend not only on the development of markets for the exchange of goods but also on the weakening of state, religious, or other normative controls over material means of expression and the rise of new, independent rationalities. Although historians and sociologists have long debated the timing of the transition to consumer society in the capitalist world—fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England (Mukerji 1983), eighteenth-century England (Campbell 1987, McKendrick et al. 1982, Wernick 1991), the United States in the 1890s, 1920s, 1930s, or 1950s (Cohen 2003, Cross 2000, Ewen 1976, Fischer 2003, Martin 1999)—these changes seem to have occurred rapidly in our time with the shift from state socialism to a market economy in Russia, China, and Eastern Europe.

The key structural change that leads to a consumer society in these regions of the world is, of course, the fall of communism in Eastern Europe and the adoption of some forms of a market economy in China. In each country, state (and party) officials decide to modernize the economy by introducing market incentives, allowing individual property ownership, and—as both an incentive to the work
force and a means of stimulating aggregate demand—encouraging the production of goods to satisfy consumer desires. Other structural changes facilitating the development of a consumer society include a movement of population, especially to cities (and, in China, to special enterprise zones), an increase in single-child families (related, in China, to state policy), and an explosion of innovation, tied not only to the creation of new products and efficiencies, but also to commercial initiatives and individual self-expression. These changes echo the earlier transitions to consumer society in market economies of the West.

In Western Europe, changes in the dominant forms of Christianity after the Middle Ages and the postmedieval disappearance of sumptuary laws eased the way toward conspicuous consumption by all social classes. In China and Eastern Europe, the introduction of a consumer society likewise depended on ideological and legal changes: encouragement of self-expression through consumption practices, tolerance of visible signs of luxury and comfort, and the shifting of goods and services (such as housing, transportation, medical care, and meals) from collective provision by the work unit to individual provision on the open, and often unregulated, market. These changes expand the means of sociability that are both available and desirable to consumers—at the cost of increasing social inequality (Davis 2000).

As in Latin America, access to new consumer products and consumption sites—from McDonald’s in Moscow and Beijing to shopping malls in Budapest and the former East Berlin—brings men, women, and especially young people into a global discourse of consumer culture. Consumer surveys show that, at least in big cities like Shanghai, people have increased their purchases of goods and services, raising both their level of comfort and their level of satisfaction (Lu 2000; for a similar effect in the former Yugoslavia’s “market socialism,” see the interviews in Zukin 1975). Ethnographies and interviews indicate that Shanghainese families spend more money on their children than ever before, including expensive purchases of nonessential clothes, toys, photographs, and ornaments (Davis & Sensenbrenner 2000). Ethnography also reveals how consumers in Shanghai use new consumption sites like dance halls to look for social partners (Yan 2000) and business people in Shenzhen express social hierarchy by inviting their associates to bowling alleys (Wang 2000). Moreover, like the commercialization of religious holidays in other countries, ethnography in the old Muslim quarter of Xi’an shows young Chinese women using traditional rituals like weddings as occasions to spend lavishly on consumer goods (Gillette 2000).

Although we have not seen any published research based on interviews with marketers in China and Eastern Europe, such a project would likely present fascinating comparative material on how the mediated global discourse of consumer culture has spread to the former socialist societies. But sociologists and market researchers have carried out content analysis of media advertisements and articles in new lifestyle magazines. These printed texts and images are extremely important in socializing people to be consumers even before the goods are widely available.
They colonize the imagination with “visions of lifestyle,” creating “a theater of familiarity in which readers may envisage themselves at home” (Fraser 2000, pp. 32–33). Thus, content analysis of ads for new housing in Shanghai shows how marketers target a broad public across most income levels while conveying the sense of a stratified housing market, in which each income level finds its own “oasis” (Fraser 2000). Informal interviews and participant-observation in Cuba and the former German Democratic Republic (Clarke et al. 2002) confirm the role of the mediated discourse of consumer culture in shaping people’s expectations, as well as in educating them in advance about product quality and variety.

Few studies that have been published in English thus far document conflicts and controversies within these societies over the acceptance of global consumer culture. One such case emerged in Budapest, however, where an offer by the Coca Cola Company to decorate the historic Chain Bridge for Christmas 1996 aroused lengthy public debates and action by the city council (Z. Fejos, unpublished paper). Although the company planned to install no overt advertising—not even a corporate logo—on this landmark, the fact that decorations would be sponsored by one of the best-known and most recognizable producers of a multinational consumer product aroused huge expressions of dissent from local citizens, who disapproved of both the company and its adoption of the bridge. Significantly, surveys showed that younger, less-educated men and women tended to approve of Coca Cola’s plan. Older people and intellectuals criticized the arrangement as a capitulation to foreign interests and a sellout to global consumer culture. Yet others pointed out that, because the Hungarian government goes to great lengths to encourage capital investment by multinational corporations, it was counterproductive to condemn Coca Cola’s offer.

As the case of the Chain Bridge suggests, consumer society may carry different meanings in different localities and offer different opportunities from those that appear at first view. Advertisements, for example, not only stimulate the desire to buy things in order to live a good life but also mark changing notions of desirability as products become more readily available. Content analysis of advertising in former socialist societies reveals a shift from representations of goods as part of Western individuals’ desirable lifestyles to goods as symbols of a country’s growth and modernization (Clarke et al. 2002). Thus, symbolic consumption of advertising is a form of anticipatory socialization to consumer society, educating people in different ways. Likewise, use of consumer sites is polyvalent. Ethnographies in both Beijing and Singapore document how the social space of McDonald’s provides young people with a gathering place, as well as with tables where they can do homework assignments (Yan 2000, Chua 2000; see also Fantasia 1995); both are welcome in a society where apartments are usually small and bedrooms are often shared. This kind of restaurant also offers women a place to sit and be served equally with men, a point made by young women respondents in surveys in Beijing (Yan 2000). Thus, as in the late-nineteenth-century department stores in the United States and Western Europe, consumption sites may be, in some sense, spaces of empowerment.
CONCLUSION: CONSUMPTION AS AN INSTITUTIONAL FIELD

Readers who have followed our discussion so far know that we prefer close, detailed studies of consumer products, texts, and sites, which locate consumption at the junction of changing social structures and cultural practices. Like studies of the production of culture, research on consumption should focus on both the production and reception of products, resulting in the production of consumers. The brief but suggestive study of the Sony Walkman (du Gay et al. 1997) and Mintz’s (1985) monumental study of “sugar and power” are exceptional because they cover all three aspects of consumption. Yet we believe that such an integrated approach is vital.

Ferguson (1998) offers the development of gastronomy in France as a “template” of Bourdieu’s (1993) concept of a cultural field; her analysis could also serve as a template for studying new forms of consumption. Ferguson uses the cultural field to isolate five “structural factors” supporting gastronomy as a new form of food consumption in the nineteenth century. First, social and cultural changes tending toward democratization stimulated a broad, middle-class public’s interest in elaborate, high-value-added culinary preparations. Second, new consumption sites—restaurants—were dedicated to the production and consumption of gastronomic meals. Third, new rules, published in critical texts of gastronomy—more or less cookbooks for professional chefs and early restaurant reviews—legitimated and standardized both the production and consumption of culinary experiences. Fourth, the development of distinct specialties (or specialty markets) crystallized different positions or schools of thought on gastronomy among chefs on the one hand and critics on the other. Fifth, networks of producers and consumers created social prestige for the new form of consumption as a whole.

Whereas Ferguson applies this analytic framework to the early history of gastronomy as a type of consumption, Zukin (2004) adapts it to the development of shopping in the United States from the 1870s to the present. She identifies the formation of shopping as an institutional field by innovations in the mass consumption system of retail stores (and recently, Web sites) that correspond to shifts in social structure and consumer culture. Dividing the institutional field into social spaces (or consumption sites), languages (or consumer guides), and stories (or narratives of shopping experiences), Zukin uses secondary sources in histories and the business and fashion press to trace changes in business strategies that broaden retail institutions over time and democratize access to consumer goods. She shows how consumption sites maintain and expand a bargain culture, from the five-and-dime to the discount store, and how, from the mail order catalog to the Internet, they embody a regime of looking that focuses attention on products rather than on the social context of their production or use. Reading texts from Consumer Reports to New York magazine, she shows how the language of consumption changes over time, emphasizing the mediating role of the “honest brokers” who write product reviews and consumer guides. Zukin draws attention to a shift of voice and
viewpoint in these texts, which gradually widen from scientific discussion of products’ composition and durability to personal writing about lifestyle and self-expression. She finds that, in periods when social mobility becomes more fluid, consumers’ anxiety increases, and they respond favorably to a broadening of retail institutions and consumer guides that brings them closer to realizing their sense of value.

Zukin also carries out in-depth interviews with a small number of shoppers of different ages, ethnicities, and social classes. These interviews show a more rational core to people’s shopping than the image dramatized in many contemporary accounts of “luxury fever” (Frank 1999) or “the overspent American” (Schor 1998). Yet she finds conflict in shoppers’ souls: working class mothers’ conflict over buying clothes for themselves or their children, conflict between these mothers and their male partners over buying their children clothes (and sneakers) with brand name logos, and conflict between shopping by necessity, as our parents have taught us, and shopping for status, as encouraged by the media. Zukin’s research suggests that shopping is both an enormously controlled and a potentially creative activity, which indicates why many consumers feel strongly about it. It also points the way toward more research that would use history, interviews, and ethnography to flesh out other institutional fields of consumption.

A similar framework underlies Maguire’s research on the development of the contemporary fitness field in the United States (Smith 2002). Focusing on developments since the 1970s, Maguire examines interactions between a culturally specific site for production and consumption (the commercial health club), a cadre of professional producers (health club managers and fitness instructors), and an array of media to educate both consumers (fitness magazines and manuals; see Maguire 2002) and producers (occupational and trade journals). Combining observations in health clubs, interviews with fitness producers, and a discourse analysis of fitness texts, she draws connections between the development of a commercial fitness industry and changes in the practice of individualism: the ways that health is promoted as an individual’s responsibility, appearance is articulated as an individual’s resource, and physical activity is defined as a measure of an individual’s capacity for social success. In the nineteenth century, physical ability testified to the strength of national character and to courage in war. This has changed, in our day, to an individual’s overall ability to compete for social rewards. Moreover, focusing on personal trainers as cultural intermediaries of fitness, Maguire (2001) shows how they are both ideal producers and consumers. Under the trainers’ tutelage, participants in the fitness field learn how to “fit” into the consumer culture of a service economy; both their body and self become “fit for consumption.”

Everyday life in the twenty-first century offers many other examples of consumption that can be studied in this way. The point of a sociological study is neither to praise nor to condemn consumers, but to understand how, and why, people learn to consume, over time, in different ways.
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