



# Introduction

Olga Kravets, Pauline Maclaran,  
Steven Miles and Alladi Venkatesh

The question of consumer culture emerged as a major focus of research in the 1990s, partly in response to the Conservative governments of the 1980s' political emphasis on consumption and the resurging critique of consumerism. Titles such as *The Consumer Society* (Baudrillard, 1998), *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (Featherstone, 1998), *The World of Consumption* (Fine and Leopold, 1993), *Consumer Culture* (Lury, 1996) and *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Slater, 1997) are among the recognised classics that defined the contours of the subject. Consumer culture has now established itself as a core concern across the social sciences, the humanities and business studies. In such a rich and contested cross-disciplinary arena, there is no one accepted definition of what the term 'consumer culture' means, and how it is understood varies as widely as the many disciplines that pursue the phenomena of consumer and consumption in a society. The disciplinary engagements diverge in their concerns with regard to the social, cultural, aesthetic, political, economic and ethical aspects and implications of consumption. Broadly speaking, however, consumer culture is used to refer to the intensification of consumerism along with increasing prominence of consumption as social, cultural and economic activity that has come about with free-market capitalism and that is characteristic of late modernity, or what many refer to as postmodernity. The term also refers to the significance of the market in governing social worlds, including through beliefs, values, and meanings created around commodities and acts of consumption in relation to lifestyle and identity. As Roberta Sassatelli (2007: 193) astutely observed, the term is 'imprecise and analytically wanting'. It intends to capture an abstract notion that in the current political economic system, the sphere of consumption is overriding the relations of production in ordering society as a whole. Also, the term's use often implies the idea that there is in fact a variety of socio-historically situated and differently institutionalised consumer cultures. What is more, the term aims to describe

actual mundane individual and collective consumer practices from buying to fantasising about goods, as well as the commercial practices that shape and facilitate everyday consumption. In *Consumer Culture: History, Theory and Politics*, Sassatelli (2007) teases out these diverse levels of the notion, and, most notably, offers a comprehensive overview of the genesis and development of consumer society as a distinctive kind of society. In particular, drawing on an impressive array of theoretical and empirical work, she carefully outlines how consumer culture was brought about by popular, social-scientific, and institutional discourses and activity around the main dichotomies of production versus consumption, rationality versus irrationality, and freedom versus oppression. This volume aims to complement such definitive work by bringing together multiple, often conflicting in terms of basic assumptions, disciplinary approaches to studying consumer culture, thereby demarcating the subject thematically, methodologically and epistemologically. The goal here is to provide an instructive resource for scholars and students, from whatever discipline in which the key dimensions of consumer culture are critically discussed.

The *Handbook* emerges from the proposition that the breadth and diversity of consumer culture which overlaps several disciplines, including business studies, economics, sociology, anthropology, cultural and media studies, psychology, geography, history and politics, has not been fully enough explored. Above all, a divide persists between those approaching consumer culture as a psycho-economic phenomenon (e.g., psychology and behavioural economics) with a focus on decision-making patterns, and those who seek to understand consumer culture from a social scientific perspective (e.g., sociology and anthropology) with an emphasis on cultural meanings and sociality. Yet, most theories emanating from sociological or anthropological sources fail to take account of the market and the marketing system itself. They tend to look at the social categories of consumers or marketing output (advertising and promotional materials), largely ignoring the institutional dynamics of markets and that many interactions take place between consumers and marketers. In contrast, business scholars have tended until recently to focus on the micro aspects of the consumer-marketer exchange process and marketing practices, often bracketing considerations of a broader context. Given such divergent foci, it is scarcely surprising that business scholars, social scientists and humanities scholars remain largely unaware of each other's work on consumer culture. The *Handbook* seeks to bridge this divide by bringing together scholars from across the relevant disciplines and inviting a critical reflection on perspectives, assumptions and methods privileged within their respective approaches to consumer culture.

In the past three decades, the rise of neoliberal ideology and associated policies not only translated into an ever greater expansion of market logic into various spheres of social, cultural and personal life, but also exalted the 'consumer' as a primary form of agency in society (Harvey, 2005). Increasingly people are addressed primarily as consumers across social domains and institutions, including education, health care, and politics, and often accept unquestionably market solutions for social ills and improvements. A great plethora of mundane activities, forms of self-expression, and enjoyment are now coded as consumption (Graeber, 2011). Indeed, ideals of happiness and a good life for an individual, as well as prosperity and democracy for a society, are articulated predominantly in terms of consumer choice, consumer spending and consumer satisfaction. Accordingly, studies of consumers by business scholars, previously

dominated by micro-economic- and cognitive-psychology-inspired approaches, seek to place consumers within their social worlds and to unpack cultural aspects of identity and group formation (Fitchett et al., 2014). This macro viewpoint conceptualises consumers as socially connected beings who seek to explore, identify and experience the world through consumption, rather than merely as rational, economic agents, who carefully process the information around potential purchase decisions. Attention has now shifted to how consumers actually behave in their everyday lives, and to the subjective, emotional and social dimensions of consumption (Bocock, 1993). Although this shift highlights the need for cross-disciplinary approaches to consumer culture, these studies have rarely reached a broader non-business audience. Similarly, scholars from social science and humanities backgrounds have appeared sceptical of more business-oriented approaches for fear of selling out and compromising the scientific status of their work. Consequently, this current volume seeks to bring different disciplines into a conversation with each other and showcase the range and variety of consumer-culture-related scholarship. The contributions illuminate various aspects of consumer culture through the juxtaposition of primary interests and key perspectives on consumption within distinct fields of study. As such, the collection foregrounds disciplinary strengths and competences as well as exposing the disciplinary biases and blind spots that hinder building a holistic understanding of consumer culture.

The *Handbook* consists of six key sections, each containing specific disciplinary foci. Recognising that disciplinary boundaries are often a matter of structural arrangements, reward and funding systems, the division into sections is based mainly on a disciplinary perspective reflected in a contribution, rather than authors' institutional affiliations. We open with sociology and introduce approaches that have proved foundational in conceptualising the notion of consumer culture. The second part considers consumer cultures in historic and anthropologic perspectives across various geographies, especially in countries like Russia and China that provide contrasting contexts to the accepted western capitalist model of markets. The third part covers contemporary thinking in business studies from an interpretive consumer research perspective. This body of scholarship borrows theories from both sociology and anthropology to look at the intertwining of marketing activities with consumer culture. Part 4 draws on media and cultural studies to focus on aspects of representation and the subjectivities created through acts of consumption. The fifth part explores object-subject relations and materiality in consumer culture, showing that objects have agency also and are not just empty containers into which we as consumers pour meaning. We conclude the volume with a section on the politics of consumption to highlight and interrogate the increasing intensification of neoliberal ideology and the logics of late capitalism that define consumer culture today.

## **PART 1: SOCIOLOGY OF CONSUMPTION**

The first section discusses the emergence of consumer culture and, indeed, the emergence of research into its development. There is a historical thread running through the section, as contributors consider classic sociological theories of consumption and

reflect on changes in the approaches and scope in studying consumer culture. Each of the four chapters illustrates how social structures, relations and values are reproduced and constructed in everyday life through practices and places of consumption. A range of arenas of consumption, food, art, financial services, public goods and elements of class and consumer subjectivity are thus considered through this lens.

The opening chapter sets the scene with a discussion of the emergence of modern consumer culture. Steven Miles documents how the nature of consumption has changed over the last twenty years, bringing a heightened individualisation and sense of precarity that in turn fuels a quest for community and experiences that fill a perceived void. He considers key conceptual developments that have significantly impacted on the field of sociology, such as prosumption, authenticity and online forms of consumption. Using Airbnb as a case study, he undertakes an in-depth exploration of the tensions created by these developments and teases out their implications for studies of consumption.

Given the increasing complexities of consumer culture, Ben Fine, Kate Bayliss and Mary Robertson argue for more sophisticated and interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives. To this end they detail the systems of provision (SoP) approach to consumer culture, an approach that looks at the full chain of activities underpinning the material production and cultural significance of different goods. Using this theoretical lens, the authors then explore two largely ignored areas, namely the privatisation of public goods and financialisation, the proliferation of which is implicated in the consolidation of new neoliberal subjectivities. Overall, by analysing consumption within the chain of processes and structures around it, the SoP approach allows for more nuanced understanding, including policy impact and outcomes.

In 'The Making of the Consumer' Marie-Emmanuelle Chessel and Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier also set consumption in its wider context, this time by taking an historic perspective. Their chapter documents the ways in which market actors, the State and civil society, as well as consumers themselves, have contributed to the social making of consumers. As part of this analysis, the authors unpack how representations of the consumer are rooted in specific political or moral projects and show that consumption is a social and political practice with an impact way beyond the domestic sphere.

The final chapter in this section foregrounds a key concern of sociology, namely class inequalities and, more specifically, how consumption delineates class. Jessica Paddock revisits Bourdieu's treatise on distinction before discussing key modifications of this work and accompanying debates around the erosion of distinction implied by the increasing choice in consumer goods. She then interrogates contemporary practices of distinction, encapsulated in the phenomenon of cultural omnivorousness, and reflects on how the impetus towards sustaining class differences persists across fields of consumption such as art, music, home décor and food.

## **PART 2: GEOGRAPHIES OF CONSUMER CULTURES**

The second part is inherently concerned with context, recognising that consumer cultures differ considerably from place to place, while also acknowledging a central role of consumption in societies and regions across the world. All the chapters attend

to the historic and geographic diversity of consumer cultures, elucidating the divergence and convergence of consumption practices, as well as the political-economic and ethical implications thereof in an unevenly globalised world.

In 'Debunking the Myths of Global Consumer Culture' Güliz Ger and colleagues methodically unpick taken-for-granted assumptions to reveal ideological blind spots common to studies of global consumer culture. The authors highlight the need to historicise both the process of globalisation and seemingly global consumption practices. The chapter calls attention to inequalities at play in local/foreign cultural encounters and the persisting reification of us/other boundaries in many consumer studies. In the main, the authors argue for a critical approach that is reflexive of the ways research into global markets and consumption might 'sanctify neo-colonial and neoliberal might and boundaries' across geographies.

Taking up this challenge, Olga Gurova opens her chapter with the question of whether it is appropriate to apply categories such as 'consumer culture', 'consumer society' and 'culture of consumption' to consumption in socialist Russia. With the significance of historical context upheld, she outlines the main dimensions of socialist consumer consumption, thereby lending support to the idea of a multiplicity of consumer cultures created along the diverse paths towards modernity that various regions have followed.

In the next chapter, Sanjay Srivastava focuses on another non-western context, this time in relation to urban developments in India and the changing nature of relationships between the state, citizens and capital. He uses this context to explicate the increasingly tangled relations between consumption and self-making that spur the cultures of privatisation and individuation. His ethnographic study aptly traces the shifts in the public imagination from savings as a national good to consumption as a personal goal, as well highlighting how the spatial transformations that characterise new urbanism (e.g., gated communities) are also producing new subjectivities.

In 'Consumption and Consumer Rights in Contemporary China' Erika Kuever picks up both the previous chapter's ethnographic perspective and its concern with the role of a state in a consumer culture. She offers a rich account of how the Chinese party-state promotes consumption through the construction of a consumer welfare apparatus, while also producing neoliberal subjects tasked with the responsibility of assuring their own safety in a complex and, at times, outright dangerous market.

The final chapter, by Andreas Chatzidakis and Vera Hoelscher, returns us to the spatial context of consumption and the domination of cityscapes by various corporate interests, with their concomitant encroachment on public space. Elaborating on movements such as urban gardening and time banks, the authors discuss the ways various physical and digital spaces interact to mediate and accelerate consumerism as well as shape modes and forces of consumer resistance.

### **PART 3: CONSUMER CULTURE STUDIES IN MARKETING**

Part 3 provides an overview of scholarship that is often referred to as consumer culture theory (CCT) or interpretive consumer research, a research area within the field of marketing that illuminates socio-cultural aspects of marketing and consumer behaviour.

Chapters in this section illustrate key theoretical frameworks in this subfield by unpacking topics of sustained interest to consumer researchers such as identity construction in the marketplace, gift-giving, market-mediated forms of sociality and consumer activism.

Linda Price commences the section by reflecting on the growth of consumer culture theory in business schools from the 1980s onwards, as part of the neoliberal surge that saw the formation of many new scholarly fields. She bases her reflections on her own participation in the consumer culture theory community, or as she describes it, her 'seat on a sideline'. Reviewing the CCT community's origin myths, she insightfully relates her own experiences of the transition to a socio-cultural focus on the consumer, using these to ponder deeper issues around the construction of academic communities and subfields.

Gretchen Larsen and Maurice Patterson then focus on consumer identity projects, highlighting the increasing authority of consumption as it replaces traditional social categories. Identity work necessitates the skill to deploy (or resist) products and brands in a way that shows understanding of the cultural meanings and discourses surrounding them. Thus, as the authors demonstrate, achieving distinction and difference relies increasingly on an individual's ability to negotiate the material and symbolic offerings of the market. However, identity projects can be precarious and there are often limitations placed on consumers to engage in such identity play in the first instance. Many market-based choices that offer new aspirational lifestyles, may also carry the risk of making mistakes that result in failure or stigma.

Cele Otnes continues this section with another key topic in consumer culture studies, gift-giving. She tracks the theoretical development of this important body of research and how six streams of scholarship shape contemporary understandings of gift giving, streams that have both broadened and diluted the definition and scope of gift-giving. Using examples of gift exchange stemming from her own kinship and friendship circles as a rationale, she proposes reconciling these six streams and puts forward a research agenda to reinvigorate gift giving research both in consumer culture theory and beyond.

Bernard Cova and Daniele Dalli cover another key theoretical focus in consumer culture studies, namely consumer tribes and marketplace subcultures. Whereas traditional consumer research (from a cognitive psychology and economic perspective) has always privileged the individual consumer, Cova and Dalli emphasise the collective construction of value. They explore George Ritzer's notion of prosumption in this context, arguing that prosumption communities challenge traditional boundaries between the market and work.

The final chapter in this section, by Jay Handelman and Eileen Fischer, continues this collective emphasis. They concentrate on a fourth major theme in consumer culture research, consumer activism and how movements mobilise to contest the actions of marketers as well as to bring about cultural change. Handelman and Fischer question some existing assumptions about activism, arguing that these lead to neglect of the contextual characteristics that shape activism. They propose a future research agenda that includes examining heterogeneity within activism, as well as broadening the categories of actors considered relevant to activism, and looking at social institutions that inform activism.

## **PART 4: CONSUMER CULTURE IN MEDIA AND CULTURAL STUDIES**

The fourth section probes into forms, regimes and functions of representations, the attendant types of consumer subjectivity, and their positions within contemporary socio-economic systems. The chapters in this section focus on a range of representational enterprises (advertising, social media and marketing research) to discuss the ways in which social values, norms and boundaries are established and reproduced, contested and ruptured, as images move through the circuits of popular culture.

In the opening chapter, Mehita Iqani posits that contemporary consumer culture cannot be conceptualised apart from the media economies, and identifies key theoretical and empirical concerns of today's global 'mediated consumer culture'. The author then argues that in form and content, the media sells consumerism as a set of values, while refracting the power dynamics shaped by colonial history and continuing global structural inequality.

Daniela Pirani, Benedetta Cappellini and Vicki Harman discuss advertising and its long-standing role in propagating the entrenched gender norms and values. Undertaking an analysis of studies on gender roles and food practices, they consider the context, as well as the implied gaze, in which the identified representations take place. In other words, as they argue, particular contextual conditions give rise to certain representations. The authors present an intriguing study of gender characters found in food advertising and suggest that the variety notwithstanding, these characters tend to reinforce traditional gender roles and power dynamics in the family.

The themes of gender, power and (self)representation are brought together by Rossella Ghigi and Roberta Sassatelli in their chapter exploring the body as a principle site for the expansion of consumer culture. Building on the authors' earlier empirical studies on fitness culture and cosmetic surgery, the chapter provides an important reminder about the role played by two contentious dynamics, aesthetisation and rationalisation, in fuelling both consumerism and the beauty-cosmetic industrial complex. The authors unpack the neoliberal notion of the self as an enterprising project across three arenas of body surface modification: fashion, body art and cosmetic surgery.

Continuing the theme of neoliberalisation, Detlev Zwick and Janice Denegri-Knott highlight how modern marketing encloses the subject as consumer and the commons as (creative, cognitive, etc.) capital. They argue, therefore that marketing can be understood as a technology of enclosure (i.e., plundering the commons) and that consumers, acting both individually and socially become a form of resource capture, especially through what is termed 'big data marketing'. The authors illustrate how marketing employs various technologies of surveillance, government and entanglement that mask its desire to enclose and control, making it appear to be its exact opposite in the eyes of consumers, often claiming to liberate and empower them.

## **PART 5: MATERIAL CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION**

The fifth section looks at the relationship between persons and things, and the processes of material articulations in consumer culture. Together the five chapters in this

section discuss what defines materialities of consumption and illuminate various guises of the material dimensions of socio-symbolic aspects of consumption. Overall, the section illustrates how consumer society is constructed through seemingly prosaic material objects, people's relations to these objects, and practices around them (e.g., curating, collecting, gifting, disposing, and so on).

Opening the section, Paul Mullins undertakes a detailed examination of the concept of materiality, highlighting key theoretical strands and how the concept of materiality avoids subject/object dualisms, as well as problematising the notion of consumer agency. Arguing that a material culture perspective extends our knowledge of the ways things shape experience, Mullins contends that the notion of materiality pushes scholars to systematically examine the bodily, imagined and visual experiences of material things.

The second chapter in this section, by Shona Bettany, interrogates subject/object relations more closely, looking at how this long-established dichotomy has been treated in interpretive consumer research and exposing some of the political and ideological assumptions that endure therein. Bettany's chapter explores in some depth work that challenges those assumptions around three main questions: what is agency? what is/becomes an object/subject? and what is a relation? In doing so, she foregrounds new theoretical avenues that hold much promise for future insights into the materialities of consumer culture.

Then Franck Cochoy and Alexandre Mallard discuss Actor Network Theory (ANT) and its contribution to material culture studies. They introduce the concept of 'consumer cultivation' to signify the ways in which consumers are framed by a wide range of market actors, including market-things, like shopping trolleys. Based on a relational conception of action and an emphasis on innovation, the authors highlight the processes through which consumer-product encounters occur, and how this collective work shapes consumption. For these authors, consumption is realised through the mutual tasks of shaping products and cultivating consumers.

The fourth chapter by Benoit Heilbrunn gives a very comprehensive overview of the many ways that material objects impact on our environment and the different theoretical strands that help us understand this impact. Looking at the semanticisation of objects, he explores various semiotic, philosophical and anthropological perspectives around the symbolic sign systems that objects may convey. The aestheticisation and romanticisation of objects play a key role in contemporary consumer culture, with design activities increasingly endowing objects with existential values.

The last chapter in this section is by Brett Scott, a campaigner, former broker and author of *The Heretic's Guide to Global Finance: Hacking the Future of Money*. Pondering on the implications of the drive toward a cashless society, he stresses the importance of resisting 'the digital panopticon' that seeks profit maximisation for the few and at the expense of the many who it will exclude.

## **PART 6: THE POLITICS OF CONSUMER CULTURE**

The final section cuts across disciplinary boundaries as the authors bring a political economy perspective to explore the ways in which markets, commodities and

consumers – and the networks of relations in which they are embedded – are a part of a political-economic system. What is more, in today's late capitalist societies, social membership is largely defined by one's consumptive, rather than productive role; indeed, according to Bauman (1998), citizenship hinges upon ability to consume, and those who are unable or unwilling to consume are deemed to be failing in their civic duty. Building on this understanding that consumption is always already politically structured and inextricable from the conditions of production, state policies and politics, the chapters explore consumption as a site of modern governance and discuss the possibilities and limits of political, ethical and generally transformative praxis through consumer culture.

Stefan Schwarzkopf provides a wide genealogy of the concept of choice, seeking to trace the historical, cultural and political circumstances of how choice became reified as a social policy aim in its own right. The author clarifies a common conflation of the terms 'choice' and 'decision' before offering a comprehensive historical-philosophical account of the meanings and origins of 'choice', particularly focusing on how the notion acquired a more empowering and proactive meaning – having choice and being offered a choice – that underscores its reification as an organising principle in a modern society. The key insight to be derived from this rich contribution is that the concept of choice is the outcome of a deliberate and highly politicised invention.

In 'Are you Neoliberal Fit?', Anisha Datta and Indranil Chakraborty note that political economy tends to be invoked primarily in the discussions of consumption or rather 'feeding' the poorest populations of this world. Yet, the authors state, to understand today's consumerism along with such 'bizarre phenomena' as produce wastage on an industrial scale by food manufacturers, researchers must interrogate the ideology and discourses that define the consumption cultures of the middle classes. The authors then proceed to explicate 'a neoliberal self', a mode of subjectivity effectuated by the neoliberal structural and policy changes, and discuss attendant patterns of consumption and the ever worrying individualisation of life that these patterns enact.

The next chapter considers the possibilities of systemic transformation in the context of sustainability, as it increasingly turns into an institutional economic doctrine from being mainly a social concern. Pierre McDonagh, William Kilbourne and Andrea Prothero argue that the political aspects of consumption become notable under conditions of limits to economic growth. Thus, framing sustainability as a mere trend, even if a mega one, constrains understanding of its significance and impact. They propose a new political economy approach as a way to capture and examine the politics of sustainability as an economic doctrine.

In the current political climate marked by the rise of populist nationalism, Eleftheria Lekakis's 'Buying into the Nation: The Politics of Consumption and Nationalism' is particularly resonant. She urges us to critically interrogate the popular wielding of consumption as a political tool to fight injustices, arguing that it can be used to advance conservative, nationalistic politics just as effectively as to express progressive political sentiments. The author goes on to systematically unpack the relationship between nationalism and consumption, and outlines the four key areas of study: ethnocentric consumption, economic nationalism, consumer nationalism, and commercial nationalism.

The *Handbook* closes with a chapter by Alan Bradshaw who offers a useful exposition of the construction of the consumer in consumer culture research. In order to do this he revisits debates on the consumer as manipulated dupe versus the consumer as liberated identity-seeker. Then, introducing us to two new texts on the topic, one by Holly Lewis and the other by Alison Hume, he discusses how neither side in these debates is convincing and that both serve to mystify and naturalise broader class antagonisms. In conclusion, Bradshaw shows how analysing a commodity trail can reveal hidden labour in supply chains that can be used to imagine new forms of global solidarity.

## CONCLUSION

We hope this *Handbook* provides scholars and students with a substantive reference point from which to further develop their interest in consumer culture. The sections included here present a broad audit of the major paradigms, key topics, and varying concerns pertaining to the subject, and set these within their socio-historical contexts and background disciplines. Many contributions draw on the latest research and thinking, demonstrating a remarkable breadth of empirical contexts and depths of ideas in the myriad world of consumer culture studies. The volume reflects contemporary debates – for example, implicating the study of consumption and the consumer within the current political economy and neoliberal ideology therein – and many contributors point out the areas requiring future research, as well as considering how the field overall is likely to develop. The *Handbook* is by no means an exhaustive compilation of material on the subject, instead it is intended to be a cultural panopticon, offering a view over a wide range of discussions on consumer culture across swathes of the humanities, social sciences, and business studies.

## REFERENCES

- Baudrillard, J. 1998. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. Sage, London.
- Bauman, Z. 1998. *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*. Open University Press, Milton Keynes.
- Bocock, R. 1993. *Consumption (Key Ideas)*. Routledge, London.
- Featherstone, M. 1998. *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. Sage, London.
- Fine, B. and Leopold, E. 1993. *The World of Consumption*. Routledge, London.
- Fitchett, J.A., Patsiaouras, G. and Davies, A. 2014. 'Myth and ideology in consumer culture theory' *Marketing Theory*, 14(4), pp. 495–506.
- Graeber, D. 2011. 'Consumption' *Current Anthropology*, 52(4), pp. 489–511.
- Harvey, D. 2005. *Neoliberalism: A Brief History*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Lury, C. 1996. *Consumer Culture*. Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Sassatelli, R. 2007. *Consumer Culture: History, Theory and Politics*. Sage, London.
- Slater, D. 1997. *Consumer Culture and Modernity*. Polity Press, Cambridge.