

## Introduction

Consumption is an important part of identity esp. in affluent societies. Affects interactions and relationships with peers, families and parents, so has an impact on psychological development.

## Consumption

**Edwards** - defines consumption as three interconnected elements:

**Consumerism** - shopping and commodities

**Leisure** - consumption of services and commodities

**Consuming** - e.g. eating/drinking; wearing of clothes; viewing and listening.

The three elements can occur together, and may include money, rituals, social groups, political policies and fashion.

**Lury** - 'consumer culture' - more than using up products, but about how they are adapted/converted for a person's own use. Affluent societies are 'cultures of consumption'.

What we consume does not have a fixed meaning - e.g. Madonna, corsets as outerwear, re-interprets manufacturer's intended usage. She is therefore an 'active agent' rather than a 'passive consumer'.

Consumption is more than fulfilling physical requirements - e.g. eating to live, but our choices of what we consume are affected by the values we live by. Consumption involves choice and is limited by available resources. It is not a 'one off' event, but routine (acquire, use, dispose).

**Dittmar** - 'I shop therefore I am'

It allows young people to imagine themselves differently by presenting themselves in new ways. (**Kenway and Bullen**).

Even in very young children, **Bronson** argues "I" is defined by the exploration of what is "mine".

## Book 2 Chapter 7 - Young consumers

### Consumption, identities and development

**Erikson** - adolescence is an important period for the development of identity. **Barnes** argues inner turmoil is a feature of many adolescents' experience. Accounts from 1918 and 1994 suggest that this has been a feature of adolescent experience across time.

**Kenway and Bullen** argue that consumption gives young people one way of dealing with this turmoil.

Post WWII, (1950's onwards), **Abrams** notes youth becomes a focus of media attention and of identification for teenagers on the basis of what they consume.

Clothes & music mark individuals out as belonging to particular groups (teddy boys, mods, punks, rockers ...)

Identity develops in contexts where consumption is part of peer relationships. **Haavind** argues that young people have to work to show others that they fit in to an older age group rather than development occurring as a natural, unfolding process. **Eckert** - "the next step older".

Evidence that age related preferences for possessions affect developmental processes. **Kamptner** - study of 600 Californians aged 10 - 60+

Youngest children - toys that gave comfort/security  
Older children - things that permitted enjoyable activities

Adolescents - Music, cars, jewellery

Adults - objects identified with social relationships, memorabilia, jewellery

Progression from transitional objects -> activity centred objects -> consumption associated with identity

Evidence that culture affect age related changes in preference for possessions. **Furby** - comparison of different meanings of possessions in US and Israel and how these meanings develop during life.

Common meanings found across age groups and cultures: control, emotional attachment, utility. Most important feature of what possession meant was 'use' or 'right to use'. Another is 'positive affect' for the object - important because the owner liked it.

These meanings appear to relate to identity development. US 16y.o.+ (not younger) said personal possessions involved social power, status - possessions as an extension of the individual (c.f. **Dittmar**). Control of possessions is similar to control of one's own body - **Furby**. Israeli children more likely than US to mention the right to control use as a +ve feature of ownership.

As well as cultural and age differences in the meaning of possessions there are generational differences. **Dittmar** - in different socio-historical periods people have different spending and saving habits. She suggests consumer behaviour is inextricably bound to attitudes, beliefs, social group, personal history, social history, lifestyle, shared culture. Problematic for the study of the meaning of possessions on development as they tend to be cross-sectional (rather than longitudinal) studies - differences between age groups may simply be due to the period a person grew up in.

All this research points to 14y.o.+ possessions and clothes are used to construct and express identity. Consumption allows them to display age appropriate behaviour - c.f. **Eckert's** 'next step older' notion. Youth styles allow allies with others or differentiation from others (e.g. mods vs rockers) - perhaps explaining why clothes and music are central to many young people's lives.

Children's understanding of advertising, marketing, shopping and money changes at the same time their concept of possessions is changing.

**John**, in a metastudy of US children over 25 years argued that three stages of consumer socialisation happen:

	<b>cf Piaget:</b>
Perceptual stage (3-7)	pre-operational (2-7)
Analytical stage (7-11)	concrete ops (6-11)
Reflective stage (11-16)	formal ops (11+)

The progression through these stages means a bigger focus on the social meanings of the consumer market.

By age 7, children know what adverts are and what they are for. They recognise brand names and know what sort of products they are. **Young** - under 6's find adverts entertaining, but older than that they know the main purpose is to sell, not entertain.

**Chin** argues **John's** findings are relevant only to relatively affluent US children - ethnographic study conducted in New Haven with 10 y.o. children from poor backgrounds found familiarity with adverts and their meanings, but had learnt not to pester their parents as they were poor.

The fact that **John** provides a "stage" theory is a potential weakness, since development of knowledge doesn't have to develop at the same time as perspective taking increases.

### ***Construction of identities through consumption***

Status is maintained through consumption. **Milner** found that US students are concerned about their status relative to their peers as they have little economic or political power - their own status systems are different from those of parents and teachers because of this. Status is emphasised by dress. General pressure on young people to conform to the 'rules' of their peer group. High status groups exclude low status peers.

Brands are used as symbols of high-status identities. **Sherry** - 'brandsapes' - we are surrounded by brands that we have a -ve or +ve reaction to. E.g. adoption of Nike trainers by youngsters led Nike to advertise them

As fashion items. People then believe that by wearing Nike they can take on the brand identity for themselves. Even in the case of punk (anti-commercial), manufacturers produce items in that style.

Dynamic, relational process between brands and their consumers; consumers construct their identity positions from these brands and producers reflect these positions. **Kenway & Bullen** argue consumers use advertising and who else is wearing something to confirm their decisions to consume. Meanings negotiated over time between advertising, brand, consumer and social networks over time (**Higgins & Smith**). Popular brands provide consistency in a changing world, the most popular brands symbolise the same identity in different countries.

**Anderson** - study of 40 adolescents/adults in Liverpool Adolescents selected more branded goods than adults when asked to photograph possessions that 'said something about them'. Qualitative analysis of interviews suggests the symbolic use of brand meanings to facilitate identity construction & communication. Mobile 'phones - brand the same as peer group; individuality through covers/ring tones etc.

Adolescents 'read' others through their branded possessions; more comprehensive and cohesive descriptions of what a person was like than adults from photographs of possessions. This is not always the same +ve 'reading' as advertisers/brand owners would like!

**Dittmar and Pepper** - study of social class and consumption in 168 UK young people. 93 middle class; 75 working class. Findings showed people make judgements on others based on consumption; both classes favour individuals that own rather than lack possessions. Teenagers more likely to 'read' identities from brands than adults.

Some young people position themselves against brands - e.g. **Locher** study - and construct identity that way.

Solidarity and conflict in consumption & identities. In affluent societies, consumption helps young people create their own desired identity; eliminate undesired identities and construct group identities. **Miles et al** note the contradiction between wanting to fit in with peers yet being individual - so it's not always the case that consumption provides complete freedom in the expression of identity.

Fitting in is fun - **Garratt**, on the Bay City Rollers. **Milner** suggests the seeking of status through conformity is at work - with the paradox that to be successful at conforming people have to continually change their style. However, once someone is popular, they can use more individual identities without being excluded.

**Blatchford** found because social and group identities are so important to young people they can be used as a source of rivalry/anxiety and teasing - e.g. clothes and music styles (UK). **Eckert** (USA) found conflicts occur between groups who both believed themselves to have the highest status - 'jocks' vs 'burnouts'. **Locher** argues it is the exclusionary nature of young people's groups that reinforces cohesion more than the inclusion factors. **Kinney** found older adolescents are less rigid in their exclusions and more tolerant of individual differences in styles than younger teenagers - fits in with **Milner's** idea that powerlessness is important - older teenagers have more control over their environment than younger ones.

Societal differences and style identities - it is often possible to see divisions occurring because of gender, race and class in the identities created through style and consumption.

**Gender** - **Griffin, Lees, Thorne, Haavind, Walkerdine** all separately provide evidence for gender differences in consumption, driving differences in gendered identities.

**Ethnicity** - **Milner** notes in the US context, minority ethnic groups are concerned with fashion.

**Class - Walkerdine and Lucey** suggest this is becoming less important and that young people have yet to acquire their class position distinct from their parents (**Phoenix and Tizard**). However, access to money is still a feature of identities related to consumption.

### **Theories of identity & young people's consumption**

Three explanations:

Ego identity theory (psychosocial) - **Erikson**;

SIT and SCT - **Tajfel and Turner**

Positioning Theory (social constructionist) - **Davies & Harré**

### Ego identity and consumption

Identity is important during adolescence - several life decisions have to be faced and at the end of it, ego identity is achieved. It is therefore normal to experience a crisis of identity during adolescence. The period before ego identity is achieved is termed 'psychosocial moratorium'. It is a period of experimentation with identities without commitment before finding a 'niche' in society.

Communities are central to achievement of identity - solidarity with your communities ideals is needed. The theory suggests that fear of losing identity is associated with young people over-compensating by identifying with cliques, and developing clannishness. This fits in with evidence about how clothes, music and style are used.

This theory explains how identity develops and there is evidence that clannishness occurs (**Miles; Widdicombe**). But the difference he argues that exists between adolescent clans and adult clans is too static a view of society. There is no allowance for young people to actually change the society into which they are growing up in as they develop adult identities.

Rather than adopting pre-existing identities; consumption allows the use of objects to project meanings they want others to 'read'.

### SIT and self-categorisation (SCT) theory

**Nesdale** has adapted SIT to explain the development of national identity; it is therefore possible it could be used to help understand young people and consumption.

SIT argues to develop a social identity, people have to categorise themselves as belonging to a group. As group membership is important to identity formation, people are motivated to rate their ingroups +vely through -ve comparisons with others - outgroups.

**Turner** adapted SIT to take more account of the cognitive processes involved in self-categorisation - hence SCT. It argues that when people think they are part of a group they depersonalise themselves at that time - it is their group characteristics that become important when they are in the context of thinking themselves as being part of a group.

You have to be able to stereotype yourself as an interchangeable member of a category - i.e. you have to be able to think of yourself as a mod, for example.

**Andes** argued SIT could be used to account for the process of growing up punk - young people rebel from the norms of parents to affiliate themselves with the punk lifestyle - an identity to which individuals have a 'commitment career'. Other group membership (rebellious or not), such as "young conservatives" may also fit the same developmental trajectory.

Speaking with us/them distinctions is an indication of self-categorisation e.g. "we call ourselves rude boys coz we hate authority".

However, SIT/SCT doesn't necessarily explain this, as you have to construct the other group negatively for the theory to hold. That doesn't always happen. SCT also provides an idea of/justifies what appropriate behaviour for the group is.

It's also not certain SCT or de-personalisation is definitely responsible for young people's accounts.

While SCT is used in context dependent situations to describe how identity arises it argues the process is universal - the processes may in fact be different for different young people and different groups.

Stereotypes are persistent - but young people's style groups change rapidly (**Milner**). If SCT is to account for this changeability, it would require self-stereotypes to be capable of changing quickly too. **Starkloff** study of 'scooterists' shows what it means to belong to a group constantly changes and shifts and is contested - 'there are two sort of mod organisations' ...scootering is authentic; everything else that came from it is treated as ephemeral by the group members. The idea of 'moving with the times' indicates the category is constantly reconstructed - so self-stereotyping required by SCT may not account for identities that are constructed through consumption.

### Positioning Theory

A social constructionist approach - we understand the world through constructing it from social contexts and resources available to us - it is not 'naturally' occurring.

**Woodward** argues identities are formed when we interact with others, marking ourselves as the same as or different from other people. Symbols are used to help us make sense of the world, characterised by structures that either limit or provide us with opportunities for choice. Individual and collective actions allow us to define and (re)construct our identity. Collective actions allow us to change the structures that constrain us. Identity formation illustrates the relationship between society's structures and our own agency.

**Davies & Harré** - developed the concept of 'positioning' - people are not fixed in social locations; they are in dynamic social relationship in which each interaction involves us taking up a different position. We make assumptions about other's positions and treat them accordingly. The positions that people adopt can become part of their 'identity project'.

It is relevant to understanding the construction of identity through consumption as people can quite easily position themselves through this mechanism.

**Widdicombe and Wooffitt** found that young people were constructing their consumption identities as they interacted with their interviewer.

It can help explain their findings that some young people construct themselves as authentic individuals at the same time as contrasting themselves to others in the same style group - e.g. 'pseudo goths'.

PT can account for the fluidity in identity that is difficult to do so through ego identity theory and SIT/SCT.

It allows for contradictory identities to be constructed through consumption - e.g. **Willis** interview - "fancy dress is everyday clothes ... everyone has a costume on".

Identities constructed through consumption can therefore be used as resources in interactions with others (SC perspective).

Less clear why some identities are much more common; arguable it treats identities as too optional and ignores that some aspects of identity (gender, ethnicity, class) cannot be easily, if at all changed.

It emphasises language - therefore unsuitable for explaining things that cannot be put into language.

Does not explain why an initial position might subsequently be resisted.

Useful for explaining how an identity gets formed at a particular point in time, but as with SIT/SCT, does not provide a developmental trajectory.

### **Conclusions**

Consumption is ongoing; an individual and collective process involving the construction of meanings.

In an affluent society, it is a relatively easy way for young people to construct an identity for themselves and show they are ready to go to the next step in being older.

Part of the learning process of how to interact with peers - solidarity and conflict.

Consumption involves the negotiation of differences - e.g. gender, race, class.

14y.o.+ have sophisticated economic understandings.

Ego identity, SIT/SCT and positioning theories go some way to explaining consumption identities.