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# Chapter 1

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## Introduction

### **The production of consumption**

This book considers the work of designing, marketing and selling consumer goods, services and experiences and considers how these products are made desirable. I wanted to write this book for a number of reasons. One of the most important ones was to contribute to a comprehensive, extensive and imaginative understanding of work. I believe that work – what it is like for those who do it, how it is organised by employers and how it interacts with other significant dimensions of social life – to be one of the most important topics for study by social scientists. Work affects life chances, is a source of inequality, is a source of pleasure and provides a sense of who we are as people. I consider it impossible to study work as though it existed outside of society, outside of social relations, other economic relations, the sensory and natural world and our understandings of what's right and what's wrong (Pettinger et al., 2006; Strangleman and Warren, 2008: 4). In this book I focus on certain kinds of entwinings, some relationships, as it is not possible to cover all without being superficial. I focus specifically on those which concern consumers, consumption and consumerism (terms that I'll explain in Chapter 3), as we should notice the work that makes consumption, as this helps us to understand both what work is like, and what consumption is like, and provides an insight into how global capitalism operates.

A great deal of the work that produces consumption involves branding: branded goods like a bottle of *Evian*, branded outlets like

*Subway* or a supermarket chain, or branded places like theme parks or even cities (think of New York, ‘the city that never sleeps’). Branding is central to how selling occurs; it is the phenomenon that links design to marketing to sales, and so this book will pay a lot of attention to how branding is put into place (whilst recognising that not all consumer products are branded). All the workers, occupations and activities considered in this book are included because they contribute tangibly to the saleability of a consumer product, by adding value, encouraging us, the consumers, to buy or by signalling something about the product that we’re interested in.

Different kinds of work are involved in getting a product into our lives, but not all of those forms of work are of interest here. I’ve followed two principles in deciding what to consider. The first is to distinguish between goods and services made for ordinary consumption and other kinds of goods and services. The market in intermediate goods, goods predominantly bought by states, corporations or financial services, is not considered here. The second is to focus on the forms of work that contribute to sales by adding symbolic value, in particular on those forms of work where the individual has a strong impact on the outcome. Substituting one advertising creative for another means a campaign will change, but substituting one logistics company for another won’t influence how desirable a product is, as long as the product arrives in time. It is the specificity of a worker’s involvement in the consumption process that makes them of such interest. Table 1.1 is my list of the kinds of occupations and activities that count.

At first glance, these occupations seem diverse. It’s easy to guess what some of them involve; others are not so obvious. All of them are real and have been gleaned from published research. Some are highly paid; others are not. What they share is that they make an obvious and explicit contribution to the production of consumption, to selling, to making consumer capitalism happen, and to generating a particular experience of being a consumer. It is this shared engagement in the production of consumption that brings them together in this book under the heading ‘commercial work’. Contemporary service-based economies have substantial numbers employed in these occupations, facilitating the consumption of goods, services and leisure experiences of others. In some instances it is possible to find many of these occupations within the same organisation, as in the case of large experience-led corporations like *Disney*. In other cases, specialist organisations (such as branding agencies) provide services for a range of client companies who employ customer-facing staff.

Table 1.1 Commercial occupations

|                             |                            |                      |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| Advertising creative        | Advertising director       | Bartender            |
| Brand builder               | Brand designer             | Brand manager        |
| Brand consultant            | Brand essence creator      | Brand explorer       |
| Brand positioner            | Brand president            | Brand refresher      |
| Buyer                       | Call-centre operative      | Casting director     |
| Clerk                       | Communications director    | Content developer    |
| Cool hunter                 | Copywriter                 | Creative director    |
| Customer experience manager | Customer relations manager | Designer             |
| Dreamweaver                 | Fashion buyer              | Flavourist           |
| Kitchen salesman            | Leisure manager            | Marketing strategist |
| Media director              | Merchandiser               | Model agent          |
| Place marketer              | Product designer           | Publicity manager    |
| Sales assistant             | Sales person               | Shopkeeper           |
| Stylist                     | Ticket agent               | Tour guide           |
| Trendspotter                | Waiter                     | Window dresser       |

### Five questions about consumption

Are you wearing denim? There's a strong chance you are: half the population wears denim on any given day (Miller and Woodward, 2011). Thinking through how it is that you came to be wearing the jeans you're wearing is an ideal way to introduce the key themes of *Work, Consumption and Capitalism*, as it reveals the complex and interlinked forms of work that make consumption possible. I have five questions to ask you about your jeans, as a way to introduce the key themes of this book.

*Do you have a favourite pair of jeans?*

They're yours, you own them and you've shaped them as you've worn them. Perhaps the knees are a little bit baggy and there are a few paler

patches. Consumption refers not just to the act of buying a standardised product like jeans, but to the more personalised practice of using the product. Denim companies and their brand agencies have worked hard to teach us that the personalisation of a well-worn pair of jeans is something worth having. You have a sensory encounter with these jeans (Candy, 2005): they feel comfortable, not too tight, but warm. They help you fit in, as they did for Kerry who had been mocked by schoolmates for wearing a purple jumpsuit. Kerry distanced herself from being the ‘purple image girl’ by wearing ordinary blue jeans, white t-shirt and black blazer (Nenga, 2003: 179).

The symbolic value of jeans matters here. Symbolic values are the immaterial associations that something has: jeans signal conformity, but carry the memory of earlier associations with youth rebellion. How are our personal experiences of consuming goods and services affected by social position? What work do we do on the things we own? In Chapter 3, we will ask questions about consumer behaviour, feeling and experience to understand how individual consumption is influenced by the networks of relationships that surround us, the social and cultural milieu in which consumption happens, and the economic organisation of consumption. In Chapters 6 and 7, we will explicitly address how commercial work affects individual consumption.

### *Are your jeans fashionable?*

Vintage flares, bootcut, skinny, low-hanging so your underwear shows, loose and relaxed: at different times these styles count as fashionable or unfashionable. You may not be bothered about being fashionable yourself, but you can see the impact of the fashion system on the consumption practices of those around you, or perhaps you have watched the film *The Devil Wears Prada* and recall a scene where fashion magazine editor Miranda explains how the specific colour of fashion refusenik Andy’s cheap cerulean blue jumper originated in the colour decisions made by high-status fashion designers. What counts as fashionable emerges through a complex and ongoing mediation process, whereby some styles and items become fashionable and others lose that status. At some point, someone decides that what was once a ‘cool’ denim jacket at the start of the season is not so appealing any more, and puts it on the sale rack (Entwistle, 2006: 318).

Clothing buyers look through, and try on, possible denim ranges in order to decide which should be stocked in their stores, and where in the shop they belong – are they ‘cult’ high fashion jeans, or mainstream ones? The aesthetics of the jeans are central to this judgement

process, with ‘the main qualities of selection being their fit on the body and detailing in the fabric – for example, “distressing”; “whiskers” (tiny lines around the crotch and knee) and wash – all of which cannot be reproduced faithfully in two-dimensional form’ (Entwistle, 2006: 712). Fashion writing in traditional magazines and blogs mediates ‘what’s cool’, tells potential consumers about a new cult brand or style. Design work, marketing, advertising and other kinds of promotion are also involved in mediating what counts as fashionable. How are these decisions made about what should be sold, and on what criteria? Buyers are just one of the occupations that mediate production and consumption and influence what is fashionable, and we will consider their relationship to other occupational groups (Chapter 4), assess the skills and knowledge of comparable workers (Chapter 5) and explore how emotions and aesthetics affect fashion (Chapters 6 and 7). We will see how the many categories of commercial workers are interconnected.

### *Are your jeans branded?*

Branding is one of the most important dimensions of the promotional work aimed at making a product like denim appealing. Whilst much of the denim we wear is a ‘nondescript’ (Miller, 2009: 34), standardised product bought in a supermarket or other mass-market store, branded denim is common. *Levi Strauss* defines its jeans as ‘workwear’; *Wrangler* references the history of denim as the clothing for cowboys and outsiders, and it’s likely that people reading this book, like many other global consumers, have heard of at least one of these brands. They are ‘global’ brands, marketed as culturally American. New, expensive denim brands (*Acne, 7 For All Mankind*) can be two or three times as expensive to buy, reflecting how denim has been repositioned as a high-status product.

Your jeans might come from a ‘branded garment retailer’ (BGR), selling to a specific consumer segment of people like you (according to age, class and gender). Or they might be jeans bought to signal your attachment to a subcultural group. Brand owners do a lot of work to find out who buys different brands and styles, and how they use and feel about them. *Levi Strauss* does not just sell jeans, but shirts, jackets and other items too. Not all are made from denim, but all have been carefully assessed as being compatible with the core brand values (Holloway, 1999: 71, cited in Lury, 2009: 75). This brand signals something to you as a customer (which it hopes is distinct from competitor brands), and has a set of attributes that make it attractive to some groups of customers and hence valuable. How are brand

values developed in a global marketplace? Brands, and the work that generates brand attributes and brand value, are central to contemporary promotional culture and to the production of consumption. We will build a picture of the work that builds brands, especially in Chapters 3, 5, 6 and 7).

*Why did you buy your jeans?*

The range of sales strategies used to make goods alluring, including advertising, viral marketing, promotional discounts and active selling, are critical activities in a global capitalism that depends on consumer markets for goods and services. Your jeans, whether bought from a highly branded ‘experience’ outlet like *Original Levis*, from a global or regional BGR like *Gap*, from a department store that stocks a range of different brands, from a supermarket, market stall or second-hand retailer, have been worked on to make them more attractive to you and consumers like you.

*Levi Strauss* was a ‘market leader’ with shrink-to-fit jeans in the 1980s until ‘hip-hop came from nowhere to loosen all jeans’ (Molotch, 2003: 208). Since then, it has worked to develop a new ‘brand image’, represented by a recent (2010) advertising campaign under the slogan ‘we are all workers’. *Levi Strauss* is represented in this campaign as the clothing of ordinary people, struggling in the face of economic recession. An actual town, Braddock in Pennsylvania USA, is reconfigured as a ‘brand community’, and citizens of Braddock model *Levi* jeans (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 142–3). The campaign is designed to have a distinctive emotional appeal, as emotion, like aesthetics, is central to contemporary consumption. Perhaps you were attracted by this campaign, or one like it.

Alternatively, it’s feasible that you were shopping with friends and decided to try some jeans on. Market researchers say that the proportion of men who try jeans on and go on to buy them is far higher than the proportion of women who do the same (Underhill, 2000: 17). Market researchers also know that people behave differently when they’re on their own or with others. Young people browse with their friends but buy with their parents (Underhill, 2000: 152). There’s a ‘science’ to selling you things, and a group of workers encouraged to sell to you. Here’s how one sales worker felt when selling jeans:

When I first started, it was, ‘Have you heard how great our jeans fit?’ Because we were really pushing denim. Who really wants to say that? Nobody. I really hated saying the tag line. It’s the most embarrassing thing. (Williams and Connell, 2010: 358)

This extract (from a qualitative interview) suggests that retail workers are trained and managed by their employers to sell the brand's products. Sales work is a big employer, and plays an important role in encouraging and managing the exchanges of consumer goods and services. How are consumer goods made saleable? This is the biggest of the questions, around which the others are organised. Answering it means exploring links between knowledge work and body work (Chapter 5), the feelings associated with things (Chapters 6 and 7), and the rights and wrongs of persuasion (Chapters 3 and 8).

*Where did your jeans come from?*

It's very unlikely that the company that sold you the jeans was also the company that made them. The production of consumer goods is often organised through a series of subcontracted companies; so that the retailer adds symbolic meaning to the jeans but someone else organises the stitching and dyeing. The common use of subcontracting produces global 'supply chains' and is one of the key reasons why we cannot understand consumption without also thinking about how production is organised. Interlinked firms, distributional networks, 20 million tonnes of cotton, technological infrastructures and knowledge are all important to how your denim ended up in your wardrobe.

However you got your denim, many people from different places, employed by different organisations and with different job titles have done quite a lot of thinking about who you are and why you chose the jeans you did. They've thought about the design and manufacture, paid attention to current fashions, considered who you are, what you're likely to wear those jeans with, what kind of jeans you might buy next ... and even what kind of jeans you might be buying in ten years' time, when you're older, perhaps a bit plumper, perhaps a bit richer and perhaps a bit less cool. They've thought also about how they could sell to someone similar to you but from a different country, and how to sell to people who don't currently know anything of their product. Capitalism searches for new markets, and understanding how an ordinary good such as denim has come to be so common in our lives involves unpacking some complex economic, social and cultural processes that are central to the operation of global capitalism. The work that produces consumption is spread over the globe, is remunerated differently, and involves different kinds of skills. We need to link the themes of Chapter 2, on global capitalism, with those of subsequent chapters to see how individual consumers are thought of

as part of similar or different lifestyle groups, and then to consider the ethical implications of global consumer capitalism (Chapter 8).

This book explores the work that produces consumption. It considers the design, marketing and selling of consumer products: goods, services and experiences. It focuses on those who work in these fields and explores how they create desirable products. It makes three assumptions. Firstly, that it is helpful to understand consumption's role in global capitalism if we think of it as something that is worked on. Secondly, that exploring what workers in different occupations contribute to encouraging consumption helps us understand consumption as a whole, even when (as we will see) the occupations that make up work in consumer capitalism differ in other respects. Thirdly, and most importantly, it assumes that capitalism operates under the skin and in the bones of daily life; abstract processes have a real impact on social life, and on our bodies.

### **Approaches to global consumer capitalism**

If you are to understand any claim to knowledge, then you must understand something about where the ideas and evidence come from. To understand this book, you must recognise that it was written by a sociologist drawing on insights from other disciplines, and by someone based in the UK trying to think globally.

#### *Thinking across disciplines*

Too often, scholars and students from different disciplines don't get a chance to hear what others think. Even new disciplines that developed by bringing together ideas from older disciplines tend to set up boundaries around what distinguishes their approach from others. For example, management and organisation studies, where some of you may be based, draws on economics, sociology and psychology. This is an inevitable process of developing a new and specific way of thinking. Within sociology, my own current discipline, there are those who study work, those who study consumption and those who study the production of commercial cultures, and conversations between sub-disciplines are fairly unusual. Sometimes too, the benefits of intra-disciplinarity, let alone inter-disciplinarity, are not recognised by those working within an established trope of how to research a topic. In this book, I bring together literatures from quite distinct fields of study, as well as those which are really quite similar, if only they knew it. You'll see references

to marketing, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, history, economics and political theory. Sometimes it will be important for you to know the history of an idea or thinker, and I'll give you some clues. At other times you will need to do a bit of detective work yourself (for example, to look at where research was published) to understand it in more detail. Questioning of sources and knowledge claims is at the heart of being a university student, and is a skill worth honing. A good question to have in your mind is: 'On what grounds is this claim being made?' You might consider the disciplinary background of the author and the research methodology used to interrogate the social world in assessing any claim. You might also think about how your own intellectual biography makes you predisposed towards the insights of some disciplines rather than others. This kind of work is absolutely central to becoming a critical thinker, which is what your university studies are all about.

An exchange in the journal *Consumption, Markets and Culture* between marketing scholar expert Morris Holbrook and the historian of consumption Colin Campbell (Campbell, 1997; Holbrook, 1997) nicely illustrates the benefits and challenges of inter-disciplinarity. They agree that reading across disciplines is fruitful for providing alternative and complimentary insights. But whilst Holbrook suggests Campbell would benefit from reading the marketing research literature, Campbell suggests that Holbrook is promising insights that this literature is not able to deliver. Different methodological positions, different historical foci and – underdeveloped in this exchange – differences between economics and culture are all challenges for inter-disciplinary work, which has to sacrifice depth for a broad perspective.

### *Thinking globally*

I am a British academic who works in a British university. It would be easy to assume that British, or at least European, examples provide 'good enough' instances of the phenomena we're studying here to stand in for other places, or at least those that are at a similar level of economic development, that are geographically close or speak the same language and so on. However, it's important to be wary of such a claim to universalism. Whilst the concepts and theories I use tend to have been developed in the 'West' or 'Global North', I've searched for examples from elsewhere, and have asked you to think of others. One of the notable features of global consumer capitalism is the way similar experiences (going to a *McDonald's*, to use the most common example) sit alongside remarkable global differences in the kinds of goods, services and experiences, the feel of consumption or how

people behave in consumer spaces. By the end of the book, you will be able to make your own argument as to what these similarities and differences are, and whether it's important to maintain differences. Challenging and questioning the intellectual dominance of written English, and the perspective of the developed West when looking to understand consumer capitalism, relies on being able to understand how scholars make tacit assumptions about how general an experience might be. This is another area where you will develop your critical skills in the course of reading this book, by asking the question, 'How well would this idea fit in a different setting?' That setting might be your own home town or region or those of your classmates or even a place you've visited as a tourist.

In the case of consumer capitalism, it's particularly important to consider how well an idea extends beyond an intellectual tradition because of how 'global' the phenomenon itself is. The story of denim makes clear that production and consumption are linked: the jeans you're wearing might have been made in Turkish factories subcontracted by an international brand like *Wrangler* or *Levi Strauss* and sold in your local department store. Or they might have been sewn in China for a branded garment retailer that sells throughout Asia. There are also significant interconnections in the production of consumption, as when American advertising agencies design campaigns for African products, or when European clothing brands open stores in Singapore, or when Indian food products are exported and marketed as enabling the customer – wherever they are – to produce authentic curries. We need to ensure that we register and understand these interconnections both for what they tell us about the operation of global capitalism, and for what they make us feel about the world: what it is like to *imagine* what will make a product sell in Ghana, to *sense* the difference within the familiar retail outlet, to *feel* that you've made a tasty and sophisticated dinner for your family. Part of the operation of global consumer capitalism lies in the production of feelings, sensory experiences and aesthetic judgements, and we must pay attention to how these are created and worked on.

## **The plan of the book**

### *Global capitalism*

This chapter explains what global capitalism is, what its history is and how it works. It shows how production and consumption are interdependent. You will learn about different theoretical approaches to

understanding global capitalism. In this chapter, we see what lies behind individualised, personalised and meaningful consumption. We will see that consumer goods, services and experiences are produced through the operation of a complex capitalist system, that markets for things are made rather than natural and that the consumption of ordinary items relies on globally interconnected networks or chains of firms and workers. The tools and ideas we have available to make sense of this complex and important process are contested. In this chapter, we introduce approaches to understanding markets derived from different disciplinary perspectives, and consider the value-laden assumptions each entails, so that you will be able to understand how these standpoints might influence the kind of arguments you will assess in later chapters.

### *Consumption*

The role of consumption in global capitalism is the topic of this chapter. You will see what consumption means to individuals, and how ‘consumer capitalism’ is produced through the many forms of marketing in use today. We need to understand consumption if we are to be able to understand the work that produces it. We use historical evidence to explore how consumption changes, so as to understand the infrastructural, organisational and demographic influences on contemporary consumption, and to explore differences in consumption between places. We will also discuss how consumption is not simply the act of a freely choosing individual. Not only are individuals constrained (for example, by income, by what’s available to them), but there are multiple influences on how individuals consume. Age, lifestyle, gender, nationality, ethnicity, family circumstances and values are some of the factors that influence consumption; marketing, advertising, branding and fashion industries pay attention to these.

### *Commercial work*

This chapter looks at the kinds of work that are important to making consumption possible, and explores different ways of thinking about this work: as part of a service sector, and as engaging in the production of culture. It looks at definitions of ‘service’ and considers how commercial work includes different kinds of ‘service’. In order to explore more specifically *how* commercial work produces consumption, you will consider the concepts of culture work and cultural intermediation as useful for understanding how symbolic value is produced. This chapter will provide you with an understanding of how commercial

work is organised and experienced in contemporary capitalism as flexible work. It also considers how paid workers are not the only influences on the production of symbolic values, and asks what ‘work’ consumers do.

### *Doing work*

Skill, craft, knowledge and body work are the key themes of this chapter, which compares the different occupations involved in the production of consumption. We unpick the competencies and skills of commercial workers. Skill, knowledge and craft abilities are at the basis of commercial workers’ different claims to be effective in producing consumption. Understanding how they work gives us important insights into both their experience of work and their effectiveness in producing consumption.

### *Emotion*

In this chapter, we consider how important emotion is to the workings of global capitalism, considering how marketing uses emotion to sell and exploring the effects of this on those working in consumer capitalism. We explicitly relate the questions of how commercial workers operate to one dimension of consumer culture: the production and management of emotion. We explore the relationship between the science of emotion and attempts to manage customer emotions, and we consider the power of feeling for brands, goods and experiences that comprise consumer capitalism.

### *Aesthetics*

This chapter looks at the production of aesthetic experiences in global consumer capitalism, and considers how sensory experiences of consumption are produced. It develops themes from Chapter 6, but this time foregrounds the aesthetic and the sensory. In doing so, it discusses explicitly how branding, fashion and design workers contribute to consumer capitalism by generating the small differences between products: a new colour or a refinement to the shape of a thing that gives it a new kind of value and appeal.

### *The ethics of global capitalism*

This chapter pulls together the threads of the discussion of ethics that has woven through the earlier chapters to consider the rights and

wrongs of global consumer capitalism. It returns to the ‘rival views’ typology of Chapter 2 to see how different disciplinary positions lead to different kinds of ethical judgement, and considers how we may assess such competing ideas given subsequent discussion of the production of consumption. It also considers the ethical implications of our understanding of key themes in the book: consumption, work and global capitalism. What makes ‘good’ work for commercial workers? How might we assess the rights and wrongs of promotional culture? What impact on the world does consumption have?

### *Taking seriously the production of consumption*

We conclude with some reflections on the project. What does answering the five questions introduced here tell us about the production of consumption? The conclusion summarises key arguments made in the book, and reflects on the different kinds of knowledges referred to in the earlier chapters. It makes suggestions for the kinds of research projects students could carry out to investigate some of the themes in the book in a setting they are familiar with.

### **Research and discussion tasks**

At the end of each chapter of this book you will find a series of suggested tasks to help you develop your understanding of the issues that we have been exploring. The research and discussion activities are designed to make it easier for you to develop your own understanding of a topic. There are two kinds of activity.

*Research tasks* have been devised on the basis that one of the best ways for anyone to understand complex arguments is to try to apply them to the world for themselves. Researching the world that is being described on these pages is a good way both to check your understanding of the claims that have been made here as well as to help you in developing your own critical perspective. Exploring these research tasks can be a useful way of gathering useful material for written assessments that you might have to do as part of your studies. And you might want to consider using these tasks as a way to investigate your own place of origin, or to develop a specialist knowledge of another region of the world.

*Discussion questions* are provided for each chapter as a way to start conversations about the material it contains. Verbalising your thoughts about the material, in conversation with other people – friends, classmates – is a really good way of learning how to develop your own position on the issues in question and to think through the implications that they raise.

**Research task**

Take a consumer item currently in your possession and write a short response to each of the five questions. This will involve you being reflective about your own life. Think not just about describing what you do as a consumer, but how your practices link to broader phenomena. Consider comparing yourself to other consumers: who are you similar to?

**Discussion questions**

1. Consider Table 1.1.
  - a. Can you think of other occupations that you would add to the list?
  - b. How could you group the occupations listed in the table? What are their similarities and differences?
2. What effect does your place of origin or country of residence have on your experiences of consumption?

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