The Materiality of Consumer Culture

Handbook of Consumer Culture

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Imagining Things: Consumers, Material Culture, and Material Desire

It is not at all surprising that consumer scholarship has routinely examined material things as lenses onto marketing and economic structure, dominant ideologies, and a host of dimensions of social and individual subjectivity. Nevertheless, material things often figure in such scholarship as rather shallow symbols, their meanings dispensed by style makers, marketers, and ideologues. Material things paradoxically occupy a central position in consumer scholarship even as concrete material culture, systematic empirical analysis, and the sensory experience of things often remain unexamined.

The concept materiality is sometimes invoked simply as a clumsy reference to concrete material things and their physical presence. Most materiality scholarship instead champions a more ambitious theorization of things, avoiding subject/object dualisms between things and people, complicating agency, and illuminating the ways things shape human experience and imagination beyond our control and perhaps even our articulation. Materiality underscores the power of things, resisting consumer scholarship that reduces things to hollow receptacles constituted by human interaction. Materiality scholarship fundamentally resists theorizing objects as entities that are distinct from social subjects. Materiality theories instead reject distinctions between human subjects and concrete objects and argue that objects and people constitute a mutual subjectivity. Materiality potentially pushes consumer scholars to more systematically examine the bodily, imagined, and visual experiences of material things and confront how the concrete qualities of things shape material life.

Materiality theory acknowledges things' distinctive capacity to charge human experience, placing material things in a pleasant if largely inchoate sensory experience and imagination that consumers often fail to express, rationalize, and understand. Things routinely spark powerful imaginative and bodily experiences that consumers struggle to comprehend and

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marketers aspire to manage, even as ideologues express their alarm with the sensuous desires unleashed by the material world. Materiality theory focuses on this enormous power of things while ambitiously extending the boundaries of the material. Materiality illuminates how systematic material, ethnographic, and empirical analysis of things' concrete presence can paint consumption as something more complicated than humans' symbolic projection of meaning onto mute objects.

Materiality theories build on a social scientific scholarship of consumption that emerged in the 1980s. Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood's *The World of Goods* (1979) was perhaps the most influential early volley in the scholarship on consumption, advocating an explicit focus on how consumers shape the meanings of things. Anthropology in particular and social sciences in general had a long record of material culture studies reaching back over a century, but it was dominated by empirical description or vulgar materialism. Douglas and Isherwood signaled a turn to consumption symbolism and a newfound interest in the social, cultural, and historical dimensions of material meaning. *The World of Goods* was foremost a reaction against economic determinism, proposing that economically driven explanations of material desire provided little substantial understanding of how people give meaning to material culture. Douglas and Isherwood cast things as visible manifestations of cultural categories, stressing the symbolic and culturally distinctive dimensions of consumption over rational decision-making and utilitarian demand (cf. Miller, 1995:274-275). *The World of Goods* championed a perspective on consumer symbolism that rejected facile economically driven notions of consumption simply as commerce, and in her own work Douglas (2001:262) persistently resisted the assumption that consumers "are mindless automatons." Douglass stressed that consumption's "essential nature is to make sense of things, creatively"; that perspective that did not necessarily discount the relationship between things and people or the ways material things shape human life, but it focused on how consumers dynamically assign goods meaning within cultural frameworks.

Among the most ambitious studies of consumption was Pierre Bourdieu's 1979 study *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, which first appeared in English in 1984. Bourdieu marshalled an enormous amount of empirical evidence to examine taste and its

relationship to status, which takes shape based on possession of things and qualities that demonstrate cultural capital. *Distinction* argues that aesthetic presentation in public and concrete material consumption patterns reflect deeply instilled class dispositions and maintain divisions between status groups. Bourdieu referred to this as "habitus," a classificatory framework of normative meanings instilled in social agents, or the "conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence" (Bourdieu, 1990:53). Habitus links structures and practices and tends to reproduce the dispositions associated with a specific social position. That notion of habitus has subsequently been part of a broad range of scholarship examining consumption. For instance, Daniel Miller (1987:105) proposed that the effectiveness of such dispositions and order is rooted in seemingly mundane material details. Miller (1987:103) argued that things "mediate between subjective and objective worlds," hewing to a culturally specific underlying order while taking aim on the distinction between subjects and objects.

Miller's (1987) *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* was the first of a series of studies he authored outlining a theory of materiality indebted to Bourdieu as well as Hegel. Miller's (2005:9) theoretical framework revolved around a notion of objectification he takes from Hegel, one that is "distinct from any theory of representation." Rather than assume already-existing subjects and objects, Miller (1987:28-29) instead argues that objectification is a "relationship within which the subject and object are created" and consumption is "simultaneously a practice in the world and a form in which we construct our understandings of ourselves in the world" (Miller, 1995:30; cf. Miller, 2005:9). Miller championed ethnographic methods to interpret everyday practices and practical engagement with things. That anthropological focus on everyday consciousness, patterned practices, and analysis of everyday material culture aspires to acknowledge human agency. In particular, it aims to reveal what might circumspectly be dubbed resistance (or the negotiation of dominant meanings), arguing that people "appropriate the objects of consumption to construct moral projects, not necessarily intended by the producers" (Miller, 1995:30-31).

One thread of this work borrowing from Bourdieu championed what Miller refers to as the "humility of objects." One of the key insights of Miller's (1987:96) analysis was his critique of material culture studies that tended "to perceive objects as being reflective in a relatively

passive sense," voicing an uneasiness about the theoretical differentiation between human subjects and material objects and acknowledging that goods are not simply representational symbols with no effect on meaning. Miller (1987:101) argued that most everyday material things "play an inconspicuous and normative cultural role," steeped in a "humility" that does not draw attention to itself even as it provides significant consequence framing socioculturally specific meanings. Miller argued that most things serve as a sort of framing backdrop against which consumers fabricate contextually distinctive meanings. This borrowed from Erving Goffman's (1974) notion of framing, and it is simultaneously indebted to Bourdieu's theory of habitus.

In the midst of the 1980's "turn to things," relatively few projects firmly focused on empirical description of artifacts. Among the most empirically rich projects documenting material consumption patterns was William Rathje's "Garbage Project," which began to systematically assess household refuse patterns in 1973. Rathje's (1977) initial interest was in simply assessing archaeological epistemology by comparing peoples' perception of their everyday detritus with concrete quantified refuse patterns from household trash and dumps. Ethnographic research and surveys alongside refuse analysis underscored that most people knew very little about their everyday material use and discard patterns. Rathje and Cullen Murphy's *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage* (1992) outlined an applied scholarship that could dissect concrete discard patterns and shape waste management, recycling, and food consumption practices. Rathje championed systematic material analysis methods and densely described empirical data that have often been absent from consumption scholarship, painting the social dimensions of waste and refuse management by focusing on that empirical data rather than ethnographic or documentary evidence. That research obliquely illuminated a chain of everyday material practices resulting in things that secured the mostly unexamined social status of waste.

While a literature on the cultural and ethnographic dimensions of consumption was emerging in the 1980s, historians were simultaneously dissecting the depths of past material consumption. Most of that work was crafted in a relatively traditional historical narrative, focusing on the chronological spread of global mass consumption and defining distinctive local

patterns of material consumption since the 15th century. Among the earliest of these studies was Neil McKendrick's (1960) research on Josiah Wedgwood's success marketing commonplace ceramics. McKendrick (1960:410) carefully documented labor organization and its role in the Wedgwood firm's success, acknowledging that Wedgwood was part of a revolution in industrial production. Much of his picture of demand revolved around emulation of the upper classes, with McKendrick (1960:429) arguing that "the lower classes" purchased Wedgwood's mass-produced wares "in imitation of their social superiors." This picture of consumption explained desire by reference to the structural dimensions of marketing and style, yet he also examined concrete ceramic style and how consumer desire for specific aesthetics was monitored (if not induced) by Wedgwood. McKendrick's detailed research provided a thorough aesthetic and empirical description of Wedgwood ceramics, but those things loomed as vehicles for style being shrewdly managed by Wedgwood himself. For instance, Wedgwood instructed his factory artists to clothe "naked figures that were `too warm' for English taste," alluding to consumers' reception of the aesthetics of nudity (McKendrick, 1960:415). Yet McKendrick's analysis did not question why particular things and aesthetics became desirable, instead reducing consumption patterns simply to idiosyncrasies for Wedgwood to manage. Things loomed in McKendrick's analysis as vehicles reflecting the genius who was cleverly orchestrating style and demand.

Warren Susman's (1984) work was part of a historical scholarship that embraced the consequence of seemingly mundane material things and the web of social practices in which they were embedded. Susman in particular highlighted how a very broadly defined world of things shaped Americans' imagination of citizenship in the first half of the 20th century. Susman explored prosaic dimensions of everyday American life, including how popular films, radio soap operas, and the 1939 New York World's Fair created a "special community of all Americans (possibly an international community) unthinkable previously" (Susman, 1984:160). For Susman, society's fundamental values began to be articulated in material consumption and things in the 1930's, something that might be termed a genuine "consumer culture." Susman suggested that much of the American embrace of goods and a culture of consumption occurred in mundane things that had escaped scholarly attention and perhaps even consumers'

consciousness as well. Echoing Susman, Jean-Christophe Agnew (1993:32) suggests that in the second quarter of the 20th century "a redefinition of rights and obligations articulated itself in the innocuous language of soft drinks, cars, and household appliances." For Agnew, the conversation about the rights invested in things and the ways they shape collective subjectivity happened "privately, imaginatively, and inconspicuously—in short, without discussion."

An enormously rich historical scholarship of material consumption emerged in the 1980's, and much of it focused on the broadly defined social and political effects of mass consumption. While this scholarship effectively politicized all things (especially commodities), it devoted little focus to the concrete qualities of material things that distinguished them in everyday life. For instance, Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears' 1983 edited volume *The Culture of Consumption* assembled a group of scholars who situated the roots of American consumer culture in the 1880s. The contributions to the Fox and Lears' collection illuminated the tension between mass cultural producers and everyday consumers and underscored how consumers negotiated dominant ideological meanings. Nevertheless, their assessment of a hegemonic consumer culture gravitated toward a focus on culture producers like advertisers and novelists and posed things as symbolic battlegrounds contesting class and cultural tensions.

This scholarship ambitiously pressed to define the political effects of material consumption and the "language of goods," assessing how commodities framed social and political imagination. For instance, T.H. Breen's 1993 paper "Narrative of Commercial Life: Consumption, Ideology, and Community on the Eve of the American Revolution" argued that colonial American consumers were part of what he calls an "empire of goods" (an argument he expanded in his 2004 study *The Marketplace of Revolution*). Breen argued that colonial Americans secured a collective political voice against British control of marketing through non-importation agreements. Non-importation boycotts of British goods were politically galvanizing mass movements that became the voice of a revolution against the crown. Breen is among a host of scholars who have made strong cases for the politicization of consumption itself even as the experience of specific material goods remains somewhat less clearly illuminated.

Possibly one of the richest threads of consumer scholarship champions a moral critique of consumption that tends to distill things to style and casts style as ideological manipulation.

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For example, Stuart Ewen's 1988 study *All Consuming Images* bemoans the triumph of "style over substance," a critique of consumer culture that takes aim on advertisers in particular for crafting stylistic artifice from concrete material presence. That critique certainly is not unique to Ewen, echoing the Frankfurt School's criticism of popular culture and sharing some anxieties voiced by observers since the 19th if not 18th centuries (cf. Horowitz, 1985). Ewen (1988:263) examines the commodified thing as a provocative and seductive image that has been divorced from objective materiality, with style posing as a way to comprehend the world that "addresses deep-seated desires" and "promises to release people from the subjective condition of their experience." For Ewen, that alluring promise has disempowering implications because it means "style—as a form of *information*—discourages thought." Ewen's analysis of things as stylistic artifice is distinctively dystopian, but it shares a common scholarly focus on things as symbolic vehicles.

Perhaps materiality scholars' fundamental critique of consumption scholarship is that the literature on consumption in particular and material culture in general fixates on the social meaning of consumption and says very little about things. The focus on the meanings of material culture in public social spaces often borrows from Thorstein Veblen's (1899) landmark analysis of the "leisure class." Veblen's analysis of an urban bourgeois at the turn of the 20th century focused on social and material practices associated with status. Veblen (1899:28) championed a picture of conspicuous consumption among the elite in which "non-productive" consumption of expensive things and leisure demonstrated their wealth and taste. The leisure class' consumption revolved around ideals that essentially signaled social standing through material style, and Veblen cited a host of examples including lawns, furnishings, and dress. Certainly an enormous number of scholars focus on material style in much the same way as a mechanism that has some more-or-less accepted public meaning that reflects the negotiation of mainstream ideals, which may encompass their reproduction as well as resistance to them. This approach to things views them as public symbols whose aesthetic visibility marks them out socially and publicly in service to a consumers' social and political interests.

Some theorists have focused their attention on things as vehicles for imaginative desire, shifting focus from dominant social symbolism to individualized experiences of things. For

instance, Colin Campbell's *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987:89-90) argues that a "modern" consumer is motivated less by "insatiable desire to acquire objects" than a desire to experience in material reality what is otherwise "enjoyed in imagination." Campbell suggests that consumer desire emerged in the 18th century as an imaginative and pleasurable contemplation preceding possession. Rather than distinguish between a puritanical discipline and a romantic hedonism, Campbell argues that hedonistic material desire is meaningless outside its productive tension with self-discipline; that is, the yearning for things is tempered by a puritanical discipline that suppresses some pleasures and admits others. Campbell concludes that the apparent divide between puritanical discipline and romantic hedonism is not so much a contradiction as it is a productive amalgam that fosters a day-dreaming imagination countered by consumers' self-policing. This tends to view things as vehicles for imagination, and the most desirable things accommodate the richest daydreams. For Campbell (1987:89), the material features that might ignite desire for a thing tend to revolve around novelty and "their potential for `dream material,'" but the specific attributes that distinguished such imaginative things from other objects are not especially clear in Campbell's study. Campbell is not alone in his argument that imagination is not simply a reflection of marketing manipulation or an ideologically duped escapist fantasy; rather, as Arjun Appadurai (1996:7) argues, "imagination is today a staging ground for action." Appadurai suggests that a collective imagination has emerged in contemporary everyday life in which disparate groups share mass-mediated sensory experiences that can be the grounds for political agency (cf. Appadurai 1986).

Much of the scholarship on materiality aspires to disrupt unexamined mechanisms of representation and move away from a fixation on the social meaning of things. In an analysis of Derrida's implications for material culture scholarship, Timothy Yates (1990) examined the relationship between material culture and textuality and how material things are narrated in text. Yates (1990:265-266) hoped to problematize representation, arguing that the "material artifact is *unwritten*, therefore it is not a sign, therefore it cannot signify." Yates instead evoked a material world at the boundaries of cognition, imagination, and substance. Material culture, Yates (1990:266) suggested, has "no use for the sign, but is rather immediate, undivided,

present. It is without utterance, without voice, silent; its testimony, therefore, will always be a silent soliloquy, which is to say that it is heard but it does not sound." Some scholars share this sense that things reside at the boundaries of articulation, wary of the depth that we can know or express things. Miguel Tamen's *Friends of Interpretable Objects*, for instance, argues that there "are no interpretable objects or intentional objects, only what counts as an interpretable object or, better, groups of people for whom certain objects count as interpretable" (Tamen, 2001:3). Tamen examines how people speak *for* the material world, which is fundamentally unresponsive but is made interpretable by what he calls "friends" like museum curators who "speak" to things.

Tamen's study examines how the material world enters utterable meaning, an issue likewise examined by Bill Brown's (2001) "thing theory." Brown (2001:4) argued that "we look *though* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about *us*), but we only catch a glimpse of things." Like subsequent materiality theories, Brown's focus on things probed the relationship between inanimate objects and human subjects and stressed that things shape the human world. Yet Brown distinguished between things and objects, with things emerging from objects when those objects do not conform to their intended meanings. When an object's unexamined presence is arrested somehow—a window breaks, a laptop stops operating, a nut falls on your head—it becomes a thing and interrupts the codes and signification that make objects meaningful and allow us to use them as facts (Brown, 2001:4).

Materiality scholars have taken increasingly ambitious aim on specifically what constitutes the material and moved beyond physical stuff to seemingly substance-less digital things. For instance, Paolo Magaudda (2011) probes the apparent "dematerialization" of digital music and concludes that the digitization of music in particular if not broadly defined media in general has counter-intuitively boosted the prominence of things in peoples' lives. In his ethnographic study of Italian music consumers, Magaudda found that apparently intangible digital media are embedded in an inseparable web of practices involving novel technological objects, seemingly obsolete things (e.g., vinyl records), bodily activities, and ever-emergent media technologies. Magaudda argues that digital things cannot be understood in isolation

from an armada of things ranging from ipods to phones to headphones, and they cannot be collectively understood without considering a range of attitudes toward new and archaic technologies alike. While an enormous number of Italians embraced digital music consumption, many Italian music consumers reacted against digital music as "inauthentic" in its placeless violation of an embodied musical experience represented in practices such as listening to and curating vinyl records. The emergence of digital music has a paradoxical effect of intensifying the prominence of material things, both boosting digital goods' consumption and "re-materializing" things like vinyl records that break from the social and performative activities associated with digital music.

Materiality scholars are ambitious to animate things and illustrate the specific ways they influence, constrain, and liberate imagination and action, sometimes referring to the "agency" of things to shape particular sorts of action (e.g., Knappett and Malafouris, 2008). In some hands the notion of material agency risks conferring on things a nearly inexpressible if not mystical power, but this scholarship most clearly takes aim on the assumption that agency is simply conscious willful action. Jane Bennett (2010:6), for instance, has referred to this as "thing power," which she defines as "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle." Bennett's perspective is shared by many materiality scholars who take aim on dismantling agency as a uniquely human and largely self-aware instrument of intentionality. Bruno Latour's (1996:369) collapse of dualisms between subjects and objects leads him to a similarly broad notion of agency (though he avoids the term agency). Rather than reduce the material to objective things acted on by social agents, Latour refers to things as "actants," a category that includes "*non-human*, *non-individual* entities." Actants' collective sway over reality is as consequential as self-conscious human agents, and Latour (1993) champions the notion that scholars study associations of humans and non-humans.

Bennett (2010) underscores that things are "vital" and always in flux, blurring the distinction between things and humans and instead examining how all entities are composed of ever-dynamic materials. Some materiality research celebrates this perpetual dynamism of things and the material properties of all existence—human bodies, dirt, buildings, and air are all materials with complex ever-changing properties. For example, Tim Ingold (2007) lobbies

against the notion of materiality and argues for seeing a world of dynamic materials in which we are all immersed. Rather than draw boundaries between various sorts of material things, Ingold (2007:7) suggests that humans are immersed within "an ocean of materials." Ingold (2007:35) argues that there are not relationships *between* things as much as there is a host of materials in various states of flux, some appearing to our eye as crystallized things—a phone, the highway off-ramp, a backyard garden—but all immersed in a world of interwoven substances. The only flux in which most commodities appear immersed is their intentionally short use life; when people are finished with manufactured things, they will indeed break down into their constituent ingredients, but they will likely do so in the landfill with their "vitality" subject only to the rhetorical attention of archaeologists.

Nevertheless, this potentially reads the death rites to any notion of materiality that revolves around the way in which material properties are contextually experienced, defined, and imagined. For many scholars, materiality remains firmly wedded to some distinction between objects and the social contexts in which they assume meanings, even if such meanings are dynamic, idiosyncratic, and more complicated than facile subject/object divides. For instance, Christopher Tilley (2007) counters Ingold's rejection of materiality by arguing that that the notion of materiality examines the meanings of things in relation to people and a sociopolitical and historical context. Tilley acknowledges that there is a world of things that have properties that exist outside their human articulation. However, he stresses that materiality research must illuminate why certain sorts of things and material properties become significant to people under particular conditions. Materiality scholars grounded in an anthropological or social scientific tradition typically reject simplistic distinctions between subjects and objects or mind and body, but they tend to lead the chorus advocating nuanced contextual analysis (e.g., Preucel and Meskell, 2004).

Some scholars appear unconvinced that materiality theory articulates the qualities of material things, a critique that may take aim less on materiality than on consumption scholarship. For instance, Bjørnar Olsen (2010) has advocated a picture of things that ambitiously includes a host of physical entities that collectively mediate action. Olsen frames his perspective as a "defense of things," with that defense coming against conventional pictures

of materiality that reduce things to inanimate objects securing their vitality from the social world. In particular, Olsen (2010:32) argues that consumption scholarship reduces objects to consumable signs. Olsen complains that consumption studies have little to say about how material goods are used and lived with and instead reduces things to possessed commodities. Olsen suggests that consumer research hazards ignoring nearly all of the prosaic material world that is not strictly a commodity and fixates on the "staged" material world of consumer goods being constantly arranged to represent self. Christopher L. Witmore (2007) and Olsen (Olsen and Witmore, 2015) instead champion an analysis of things that invokes the concept of "symmetry" (Latour, 2005:76-77). A focus on the symmetry between various entities in the world revolves around how disparate things constitute the world through myriad entanglements. In a similar vein, Ian Hodder's 2012 study of the "entanglements" between human and things argues that relationships between things frame a "distributive agency"; that is, actions are shaped by reflective human decision-making, the material properties that constrain and animate action, and the mostly unarticulated sensory experience of things. Witmore and Olsen (2015:191) advocate a picture of things that embraces both the autonomy and connectivity of all people, objects, environments, and stuff in the lived-in world, and all entities in the world are "thingly" even if they remain different. However, Ingold (2012:431) rejects such a "defense" of things seemingly ignored by social scientists, arguing that a symmetrical picture of materiality reduces all things to objects.

It is perhaps not surprising that some of this most novel theory rethinking things and materiality avoids a focus on narrowly defined consumer goods and examines prosaic if not idiosyncratic materiality. For instance, a significant range of inter-disciplinary scholars have examined ruins and processes of ruination (e.g., Edensor, 2005; Mah, 2012; Olsen and Pétursdóttir, 2014). Ruins have conventionally been cast as moral lessons for contemporary people, symbols that demonstrate modernity's flaws, state or class arrogance, or the instabilities of even the most stable societies. Ruins have a captivating visual dimension captured in sight as well as photography (Pétursdóttir and Olsen, 2014); there is a compelling bodily engagement for scores of people exploring decaying structures (Bennett, 2011); and there is an ethnographic dimension to the experience of abandoned places (Mah, 2012). Unlike

commodities seemingly arrested in style and form, ruins are in an obvious state of decline exposing their historical depth as well as environmental processes of ruination. For example, ruin photographer Matthew Christopher (2012) argues that photography captures these transformative processes, arguing that "the photography of ruins is fundamentally about death. … Much in the same way, a host of chemical and biological processes continue in a corpse but it is still no longer considered living." In that sense, Christopher's ruin images define things as materials in an unsettling state of flux, illuminating material dynamism and casting things as something more complex than objects arrested in form and condition. Dylan Trigg (2009:94) casts ruins as an embodied experience mediating between the "destruction of the past, the lapse in time thereafter, and the unexpected persistence of damaged materiality in the present." Trigg focuses on traumatic ruins, arguing that ruins create the material conditions to articulate the past, but the traumatic ruin secures its power from its material absences rather than from its "points of presence."

For consumer scholars, ruins may make a challenging analogy to marketplace goods. While materiality theorists often dissect idiosyncratic material things ranging from ruins to zoos to beaches, consumer research typically revolves around conventional commodities and consumers' experience and transformations of goods. Some of the most sustained analyses of consumer transformations come from subcultural scholarship. Dick Hebdige's 1979 *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* is among the most prominent studies examining the ways transformations of things defied dominant social values. Hebdige's study of punk style was part of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies' (1976) ambitious scholarship of everyday British life, especially postwar working-class youth culture (e.g., Willis, 1977). Those scholars examined a broad range of seemingly mundane material practices to analyze how subcultural collectives negotiated social and material normalization. Hebdige championed a very expansive sense of the material world that included dance, the body, and conventional commodities (e.g., off-the-rack clothes). Hebdige's analysis casts style as the aesthetic surface of alternative values negotiating complex sociohistorical conditions and "mainstream" or "parent" culture.

Hebdige distinguished subcultural consumption by its mining of disparate styles reassembled into new assemblages, what is often referred to as bricolage. Hebdige (1979:102-

2014) painted bricolage as a "science of the concrete" in which consumers rearrange material minutia in ways that subvert intended meanings (cf. Hebdige 1988). He argued that subcultures view things as signs uniting an object and its dominant meaning, and subcultural materialism aspires to unravel unquestioned representational frameworks for normality. Much of Hebdige's material analysis revolved around the ways subcultures upset dominant meanings and created new representational signs: for example, working-class teddy boys transformed the "ultra-respectable" motor scooter into a "menacing symbol of group solidarity," and sharpened metal combs "turned narcissism into an offensive weapon" (Hebdige, 1979:104). Nevertheless, subcultural things were not simply reduced to representational mechanisms with new meanings. For instance, Hebdige argued that teddy boys adopted suits, ties, and short hair--the "conventional insignia of the business world" that evoked efficiency, compliance, and authority—and viewed that ensemble as an "`empty' fetish, objects to be desired, fondled and valued in their own right."   Apparently incompatible subcultural juxtapositions of things secure much of their power simply from disrupting accepted meanings even if they do not pose any especially concrete social representation of meaning.

Subcultures such as Hebdige's punks are often cast as conspicuous consumption collectives that wield material goods to distinguish themselves materially. The ways in which 1970's punks socialized things tended to revolve around class inequality, which is a consistent structural feature of youth subcultural resistance in British studies influenced by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Various post-subcultural (Redhead, 1990; Muggleton, 1997, 2000) and neo-tribal (Maffesoli, 1996; Bennett, 1999) theorists have subsequently complicated or rejected the implied dichotomy between mainstream and subculture while championing a picture of exceptionally fluid group boundaries that underscore the sway of individual agency. On the one hand, mainstream social values or the very existence of a "parent culture" may indeed be heuristic if not ideological, and the neatly defined spectacular subculture painted in research such as Hebdige's study may not capture much of the fluidity of contemporary social collectives. On the other hand, though, the rhetorical notion of a mainstream has a real effect on social imagination and material experience, even if it is a complex reality and the boundaries for group affiliations are exceptionally dynamic.

A significant amount of scholarship interrogating fringe social collectives has explored the fluidity of transgressive subjectivities and the material dimensions of such identity. For instance, in the 1990s the term hipster began to be used to refer to urbanites distinguished by a taste for novelty and discriminating if not unique individual style. Hipsters might constitute a subculture, a neo-tribe, a lifestyle, or a market demographic depending on how those terms are defined, but the people cast as hipsters share the bricolage and aesthetic spectacle associated with subcultures like punks. Hipsters' material distinctions perhaps most clearly revolve around a notion of authenticity in which personal style expresses an individual taste and creativity that eschews mass cultural conformity (Michael, 2015). Analyzing hipster materialism as a measure of personal taste runs slightly counter to caricatures of it as either mocking parody or insincere irony; that is, hipsters' consumption of 1970's t-shirts, working-class beer, or mainstream pop music is often reduced to a masquerade that makes fun of the authentic (e.g., working-class culture, concrete historical moments) and evades sincere politics. For instance, hipster fashion in particular mines historical styles, which critics dismiss as pallid mimicry of styles grounded in authentic cultural and historical contexts. The appropriation of styles emptied of their historicity may be what Fredric Jameson (1983) referred to as the "perpetual present" in which "all that is left is to imitate dead styles." Rather than cast hipster materiality as ironic representation or symbolic parody, hipster materiality may signify nothing especially concrete. It may be what Jameson (1983:114) referred to as pastiche, the "blank irony" in which there is no assumption of normality that is being satirically imitated. A fixation on the symbolic and representational dimensions of hipster material assemblages risks ignoring that hipster things may be less about transgression, irony, or parody than idiosyncratic imagination of a creative and individualized self.

While spectacular displays like punk materialism make for a powerful example of style being wielded for public effects, starkly distinct aesthetics grounded in resistance may not capture most everyday materiality. Instead, much of the everyday world may less about transgressive resistance than idiosyncratic imagination. Contemporary consumer subjectivity may be invested in social fluidity and idiosyncratic sensory experience, which breaks from the conventional perception of consumption as the acquisition of goods that symbolically stake

claims to clear subjectivities and individuality. For instance, the material style referred to as "acting basic" consciously selects for non-descript if not banal aesthetics, and the broader "normcore" lifestyle implies a desire for social fluidity that is reflected in the anonymity of a stylistic blank slate. A term hatched by the trend forecasting firm K-Hole (2013), normcore departs from the aversion to "sameness" and the implication that individuality is necessarily expressed in distinct practices, styles, and things. Instead, normcore argues for a "post-authenticity" subjectivity in which people favor sameness and belonging over exclusivity and reject the premise that "normality" exists. The suggestion that contemporary people fluidly appropriate disparate activities and things from a host of lifestyles or social collectives resonates with much of the post-subcultural scholarship that focuses on social dynamism and rejects "mainstream culture." Normcore selects against the "trappings of uniqueness"; the implication is that in the early 21st-century world "people are born individuals and have to find their communities" (K-Hole, 2013:27). To "act basic" in this context means that people favor fashion and material things that are not inscribed as uniforms of exclusive social groups. Normcore suggests that the search for material exclusivity is an isolating experience, but normcore argues that there is "liberation in being nothing special" (K-Hole, 2013:36).

Perhaps normcore expresses the aftermath of signification, a moment in which materiality is an experience no longer tied to styles, branding, public display, historical precedent, concrete social symbolism, or even clear articulation. Nevertheless, while materiality theory frames things in an enormously complicated and dynamic ensemble of practices and things, in most thinkers' hands it does not deliver the eulogy for social symbolism, the deterministic power of class and inequality, and the consequence of ethnographic voices. Instead, materiality tempers a fixation on shallow notions of social determinism and probes how consumption might be framed in complex ways that reach beyond market determinism, resistance to dominant values, or stylistic distinction. Materiality underscores that things are part of an imagined and embodied human experience that is profoundly shaped by objects themselves. Consumer scholars committed to understanding the desire for things and the roles of goods in contemporary society can expand their analysis of things by more ambitiously analyzing the breadth of materiality in consumer culture.

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