

A Structural Critique of Consumption: Inequality, Globalization and the Aspirational Gap

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I. Is there a consumption "problem?"

The choice of "consumption" as the theme of the Human Development Report raises the question of whether there is a particular "problem" with consumption? What is the relationship of consumption to human development? Will the Report contain an implicit or explicit critique of consumption in contemporary societies?

At least two very important problems are well-recognized. The first is inadequate levels of consumption among a large segment of the world's population. Here the consumption problem is often conceived of as one of exclusion within a two-group or two-class structure--those with "enough" and those without enough. A second problem is the ecological impacts of consumption. Both these issues are being addressed by others, so I do not discuss them in this paper. I turn instead to another question. Assuming that the problem of poverty could be solved, so that everyone in the world had "enough" in some basic sense, and assuming that the ecological impacts of consumption could be minimized, is there still a "problem" with consumption? The argument of this paper is yes, there are structural problems associated with consumption in modern capitalist societies. (For a different, but related critique, see Schor 1997c.)

Within economics, the traditional approach is to posit consumption as the "solution" to wants and needs. In a classic utilitarian sense, consumption eliminates pain and produces pleasure. In a more general formulation, it creates "utility" or "well-being." Consumption is a good which solves the problem of various bads (hunger, cold, boredom, etc.). For the most part, traditional approaches emphasize the functional characteristics of consumption goods¹ or services (in an a-social sense of functional). Clothing keeps one warm or is aesthetically pleasing, food satisfies hunger or a discriminating palette, transportation moves one from place to place. To the extent that economists talk about the content of consumption they tend to emphasize these a-social aspects. This is in part because they assume that utility functions are independent among individuals, so that social effects are ruled out by assumption. Such a functional approach is also consistent with the view that consumption is a solution rather than a problem. Once we discard the assumption of inter-personal independence of utility functions, and allow inter-personal comparisons, the relationship between consumption and welfare becomes far more complex, and more empirically realistic. Furthermore, it is through this door that we can introduce some of the most important structural critiques of modern consumer behavior. (For a review of the standard literature, see Deaton 1992.)

II. A Social Model of Consumption: When Inter-personal Comparison

Does Matter

A. Social Class "Structures" Consumption

In the traditional economic approach, the pattern of consumption is predicted to be either a random distribution (of goods and services) which reflects individual tastes and preferences or a distribution which reflects merely the availability of income. In fact, neither of these expectations is borne out empirically. Rather, the distribution of both taste and consumption outcomes corresponds to a definite structure, among whose defining characteristics are social and economic class.² People of like class background have common tastes and consumption patterns. There are shared social meanings which are associated with consumer goods. These differences cannot be attributed only to functional needs (i.e., people with large families buy station wagons), but are also present in situations where no or few functional considerations apply (i.e., taste in art or music, food, style of decor).

The classic twentieth century works on the social patterning of consumption by class are Thorstein Veblen's The Theory of the Leisure Class and Pierre Bourdieu's Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste. Veblen argued that "conspicuous consumption," i.e., the visible display of discretionary spending, was the means by which individuals revealed their economic resources and established social position. In his model, goods diffuse through a vertical class hierarchy by means of an emulative

process occurring at each level. Bourdieu begins from an essentially Veblenian perspective, but provides an updated and more complex rendering. (Veblen has a linear class structure, while Bourdieu provides a "map" with both vertical and horizontal structures.) In Bourdieu's account, both economic and what he calls cultural capital affect consumption patterns. Individuals acquire cultural capital through family socialization and educational background and this cultural capital shapes their tastes and preferences. Taste, and the consumption outcomes associated with it, becomes an expression of class position.³ From the Introduction to Distinction. (While in this passage Bourdieu is talking about art and culture, his work covers a wider range of consumption categories including food and styles of decor and home furnishings.)

There is an economy of cultural goods, but it has a specific logic...Whereas the ideology of charisma regards taste in legitimate culture as a gift of nature [As neoclassical economics does--author's note], scientific observation shows that cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education: surveys establish that all cultural practices (museum visits, concert-going, reading, etc.), and preferences in literature, painting or music, are closely linked to educational level (measured by qualifications or length of schooling) and secondarily to social origin....To the socially

recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes tastes to function as markers of "class."

What is the empirical evidence for the view that social class structures consumption? Interestingly, there has been relatively little recent empirical study from within the academy. (For a fuller discussion of this issue, which surveys the U.S. evidence, see Schor 1998, chapter 2.) Surveying the U.S. literature, and to a lesser extent the British and Continental, one finds that earlier traditions which emphasized the class structuring of consumption and other social structures have fallen out of favor. The classic American studies such as the the Lynds or Lloyd Warner and his team have not been repeated in recent decades. (references here) While we have Bourdieu's wide-ranging data on France, which supports his thesis, such a study has not been replicated for other countries, to my knowledge. (There are a few exceptions, for example the work of Douglas Holt in the U.S., Gerard Schultze in Germany, and the Manschester popular culture group in the U.K.)

However, market research firms did step in to fill the vaccuum. A variety of classificatory schemes (zip code, census block, or psychographic) have been developed which are used to predict consumption patterns among various sub-segments of any given

population.⁴ These kinds of classificatory schemes are in use widely, and have become standard practice in the field of marketing. While they have not been subjected to rigorous academic analysis, they nevertheless are useful in showing the extent to which consumption patterns do in fact correlate to various socio-economic variables. (The most salient of these in the United States is the census block--a smaller unit than the zipcode, which is a strong predictor of household spending patterns.) Of course, market researchers are not interested in "social class" as a theoretical variable, and therefore have not asked some of the most interesting questions from a sociological point of view, i.e., what is the role of parental occupation or education?)

My reading of the evidence for the U.S. is that consumption does remain structured by recognizable variables, which themselves correlate to various measures of social class. The patterns are not as clear-cut as they were 60 years ago, when one could easily decode class from the contents of a living room (see the famous studies by Chapin using this method). There is far more variation in patterns, as well as many more goods to account for, and there are also clear differences in how consumption occurs, as well as just what is consumed (on this point, see Holt 1998). Nevertheless, an underlying social structuration still persists. In the case of less developed countries, I would expect that the evidence is even stronger, more akin to what existed in the U.S. and Europe in the early part of this century. When there is less income

available for discretionary spending, intra-class variation will be lower, and the order of acquisition of various key durables and other consumption goods is more uniform. In the same way that a parlor organ, or an automobile were once sure signals of middle class status in the U.S. and Europe, so too is a washing machine or a car in India today.

B. An Important Externality: Consumption also Reproduces Social Class

Consumption not only reflects a structure of social inequality; it also reproduces it. Having proper taste, wearing the right clothes, displaying certain manners, etc. are all elements of achieving and then maintaining membership in a privileged group in society. In Bourdieu's words, daily life is filled with "micro" acts of claiming status which lead to both inclusion and exclusion from favored groups. The privileged use consumption to maintain group identities; in the labor market consumption is a signalling device; for centuries sumptuary laws have proscribed modes of dress and other spending activities in order to maintain an existing hierarchy. In Veblen's view, socially visible, or "conspicuous consumption" is the central mechanism of class reproduction.

This point should be key to analyses of the effect of consumption on human welfare. Because it suggests that there is a systematic negative externality associated with the consumption of a large class of goods, namely their role in reproducing inequality. (The

externality is negative to the extent that one takes inequality to be a bad thing. There is accumulating evidence on the instrumentally negative impacts of inequality.)

C. The Dynamic Process: The Prisoner's Dilemma

The cross-sectional variation in spending patterns is reproduced through a dynamic process in which new and upgraded products are diffused vertically through the class structure.⁵ This dynamic, popularly known as "keeping up with the Joneses" is a central factor in the continual expansion of spending. (Keeping up models are variously referred to as status, positional, or competitive models. They are closely related to analyses which emphasize the cross-sectional structure of consumption.) (For these types of approaches, see among others, Veblen 1899, Duesenberry 1949, Frank 1985a,b, Hirsch 1976, Schor 1998, James 1987, McAdams 1992, Rauscher 1993, Congleton 1989, Basmann et al 1988, and Neumark and Postlewaite 1995, Brown 1994, Easterlin 1973,1995, Clark and Oswald 1994.)

In a standard status or competitive spending model, an individual's utility depends negatively on the consumption of others.

$$U_i = f(C_i/\Sigma \alpha C_j) \quad f' > 0 \quad (1)$$

where U is utility, C is consumption and α is the weight applied by individual i to j 's consumption. Individual i 's utility depends on

the ratio of his or her own consumption to a weighted sum of others' consumption. Of course, other formulations are possible. Utility may depend on merely keeping up (not consuming less than others, or not having less than the average level of consumption.)⁶ In its dynamic version, new or upgraded products are adopted by a small group of innovating consumers who increase their utility by raising their relative position. (They have the new products which others haven't acquired.) Eventually, adoption of products becomes general as people attempt to reverse the decline in their utility which has occurred as a result of their failure to adopt. Thus, products diffuse throughout the population. Advertising and marketing which promote information about the products, or their use can speed up the diffusion process, but diffusion would occur even without these efforts of producers.

In models such as (1) above, one must pay attention to the informational process. How does individual i know what the consumption of j (or the j 's) is? In small, open communities, this process is rather transparent. In modern, more anonymous settings, the informational requirements themselves become very important. In order to play a role in a status process, consumption must be of a publically visible nature. Thus, competitive spending does not occur with all goods, but tends to revolve around a particular set of private consumption products. (Thus equation (1) above needs to be amended to pertain only to visible goods.) Clothing, housing, and autos have traditionally been such important status symbols

because they are all accessible to public view, and use is easily verifiable.⁷ (See James 1987, Bearden and Etzel 1982, Childers and Rao, 1992, Chao and Schor 1996; James 1987, 1993) Savings, leisure time, insurance, and household furnishings and appliances which are not seen by visitors play a small role in the status-conferring process.⁸ This distinction between visible and non-visible goods means that the former play a special, and privileged role in the dynamic process. Because the competitive dimensions of spending are confined to this subset of goods, consumers often reduce their expenditures on non-status products in order to keep up with status goods. This occurs especially in periods when the competitive spending is intensifying.

There are two welfare effects which must be noted about this competitive spending model. First, visible goods can "crowd out" other competing uses of income. The four major competing uses are leisure, savings, public goods (including the environment), and non-visible private consumption. Second, there is a self-defeating aspect to the process, because increases in consumption tend to be general. (See Frank 1985a,b) They therefore confer no additional utility, because all utility is positional. This of course is the Prisoner's Dilemma aspect of the model--everyone would be better cooperating because consumption has costs (labor expended, environmental costs, leisure costs, etc.). But without an entity to create cooperation, the worst outcome for all will result.

The Prisoner's Dilemma aspect of the competitive spending process is itself a powerful critique of consumption and its connection to human well-being. Of course, the extent to which utility depends on positional, rather than absolute consumption is ultimately an empirical question. (The standard practice of assuming away interpersonal comparisons ignores this model altogether, and therefore the existing literature provides little evidence.) The macro cross-sectional evidence on the failure of increases in income to yield increases in subjective well-being is consistent with a strong positional focus. (The income increases are general.) (See Lane 1991,1994; Easterlin 1973,1995; Diener et al 1993, Veenhoven 1991) However, I would caution against reading too much into the time-series evidence. Because rising incomes and development generate a variety of changes in society, the lack of a rise in subjective well-being is difficult to interpret. It could be that the higher utility created by more income is offset by the decline in free time, the erosion of traditional values and social structures, a worsening environment, and the like. On the other hand, micro level data which shows that positional concerns dominate subjective well-being (Clark and Oswald 1994) provides strong support for the competitive model.

III. What's New? Globalisation, Inequality, and the New Consumerism

A. A Historical Point: Social Mobility and the Role of Competitive Spending

The twentieth century has seen the erosion of a host of restraints

which limited consumption in previous eras. On the one hand, cultural restraints such as the invocation of the "evil eye" (which warns against ostentatious or excessive spending), have diminished as commercial culture replaces folk culture around the world.⁹ Second, as secular culture replaces religion, moral strictures against consumption lose their efficacy. (A counter-weight, however, is the growth of fundamentalist religious movements.) By the 1920s in the U.S., for example, a new "religion" of consumerism emerged, in which spending, and spending without limit, even excessively, was extolled as something positive, therapeutic, and of benefit to the economy. The old saving ethic was abandoned. (See Lears, Leach, and others on this period.) Hitherto uncharted territory had been entered, in which a society of mass consumption was created with few cultural or moral restraints on spending. (One might argue that Americans have had difficulty maintaining self-restraint in this environment, on the basis of trends in saving, consumer debt, compulsive buying, shoplifting, etc.)

The third development is that a more fluid social structure reduced class-based restraints on spending. In previous eras, the class structure of consumption was reproduced in part through cultural pressures not to spend "out of one's station." (Sumptuary laws were the legal embodiment of these pressures. Of course, sumptuary laws were not typically very effective, but they do signal something about the cultural restraints.) By the twentieth century in the US and somewhat later in Europe, the system became far more open, and

it was possible for a much wider range of individuals to spend as the rich or middle classes did (if they could find the income). In so doing, individuals attempted to "consume" their way into the group they aspired to.

Thus, in the past, when status was determined by birth, history, caste and so on, consumption played only a subsidiary role in the maintenance of social position. But in societies where these factors have broken down, and status is a more fluid currency, consumption becomes more important. Urbanization, formal education, and the disappearance of traditional social relationships render spending more salient in the establishment of social position and personal identity. In the modern consumer society, commodities take on a new kind of symbolic importance. (Consumption has symbolic importance in all societies, but in consumer society its role in establishing personal identity and social position eclipse its symbolic role in ritual, religion and so on.) More and more, "what you wear" and what you don't wear define who you are and where you are located on the social map. (See Holman 1981, Belk 1988, McCracken 1990)

While the social fluidity of the present is to be applauded, it exacts a price. Individuals face more pressure to use income to gain access to a desired social group. This is particularly problematic in contexts where failing to achieve a middle class status is increasingly socially uncomfortable. In those cases, the

pressures on individuals and household to spend to achieve some measure of status can be intense.

B. The post-WWII "cycle of work and spend"

The advent of "Fordism" in the post-WWII period in the industrialized West and to a varying extent in other countries (See Jong-Il and Schor 1995b for a global discussion of Fordism) led to a particular relationship between productivity, consumption, and hours of work. The hallmark of Fordism has been the coincidence of mass production and mass consumption, made possible by the channeling of productivity growth into real wage growth. Workers reaped the fruits of their more productive labor in the form of higher wages, which they then spent on the steady stream of mass production goods they were making. (Cars, household appliances, clothing, etc.) In contrast to the earlier period (approx 1875-1945), hours of work fell relatively little in after 1945, because wage growth took a much larger fraction of the productivity dividend. (For this argument, see Schor 1990, Schor 1995a. For the historical data, see also Madison 1987.) I have described this process elsewhere as as "the cycle of work and spend," a situation in stable hours and rising spending give rise to a continual frustration of ex ante preferences with respect to time and money tradeoffs (workers would prefer to trade future income for time), and lead to a continual adaptation of ex post preferences to accommodate the situation of stable hours. (Workers end up wanting the time-money tradeoff they have gotten, rather than, as in the

neoclassical sovereignty model, getting what they want.) (See Schor 1992, chapter 5 on work and spend.) "Work and spend" owes its existence to a failure in the market for hours (it does not exist), and constitutes another structural criticism of the spending outcomes produced by the contemporary economy. (The neoclassical sovereignty model is not supported by evidence about how hours are determined.) Thus, contemporary market economies tend to operate with an output-bias, in which productivity growth is channeled into more spending, rather than additional free time. In the United States, this bias against leisure time is sufficiently strong that approximately a third of all workers now report high levels of stress and an excessive pace of life. (See Robinson and Godbey), and increasing numbers (between 15% and a third) say they would prefer to trade income for time. (See Schor 1997b on the evolution of these preferences.)

C. The new consumerism and changes in the "keeping up process": the growing importance of the top 20%

Classic postwar descriptions of the keeping up process such as those of Duesenberry, or Frank, emphasize the role of proximate comparison. (See also the seminal statement by Festinger 1954.) In addition, Duesenberry's influential account of the U.S. evoked the image of a middle class suburban model characterized by inclusion, rather than exclusion. There were Smiths and Joneses, and they were very similar. Such a description, of course, was accurate given the era--the middle class was growing, and the popular wisdom had it

that it would encompass all other classes. The nation, and with it spending patterns, were "homogeneizing."

Beginning in the 1980s, I believe this model was no longer applicable to the U.S. I call the new situation "the new consumerism." The new consumerism is more upscale, and more Veblenian, in the sense that there is more aggressive, rather than defensive positioning. The first major change was that the distribution of income was becoming more unequal. This process began in the 1970s, but accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s. The top 20% of the distribution has increased its share of income, at the expense of the bottom 80%. And within the top 20%, income has also become more unequal, with more flowing to the top 5%. **One consequence of this change has been an intensification of competitive spending.** Beginning in the early 1980s among the rich and super-rich, conspicuous consumption (in visible goods) intensified. In response, the next 15% of the top 20% also increased their conspicuous spending. (This was the so-called "decade of greed.") The 80% below, while gaining some ground in absolute terms, lost relatively to the top 20%. Among the 80%, consumer dissatisfaction and pessimism, as well as increased status consumption resulted.

The second major change in the keeping up process was the growing salience of the lifestyles of the top 20% as a focus of comparison. (In the terms of equation (1) above, the C_j has become $C_{j20\%}$, i.e.,

the consumption level of the top 20% of the income distribution.) In the past, as I have noted, proximate comparison was the backbone of the keeping up process. Because keeping up was mainly neighborhood-based, people looked mainly at others with similar incomes. By the 1980s, the neighborhood had declined as a focus of social interaction. Two alternative sources of comparison had emerged: the workplace and the television. As women entered the workforce in larger numbers, and often in white collar jobs, they were exposed to a more diverse reference group. Thus, they were more likely to engage in more upward consumption or lifestyle comparison. (Comparison with their superior, for example, rather than their neighbor.) Second, as people spent less time in the homes of neighbors and friends, and more time in front of the television and watching other popular media, the media has become increasingly important in providing information about spending patterns. (Higher levels of privacy have led to less direct exposure to others' possessions.) Because the popular media, (and particularly television) gives a heavily skewed picture of spending patterns (it portrays almost exclusively the upper middle class and the rich), it has played an especially important role in the "upscaling of aspirations." (On the impact of television in inflating consumer aspirations, and on the correlation between television watching and spending, see Schor 1998, chapter 4.)

Thus, the keeping up process has undergone a major, highly problematic change in the last 15-20 years in the U.S. The

lifestyles of the top 20% have become cultural icons, which are looked to by those with far less income as increasingly necessary and worth having. In one study of consumers, researchers Susan Fournier and Michael Guiry found that 35% aspired to reach the top 6% of the income distribution, and another 49% aspired to the next 12%. Only 15% of their sample reported that they would be satisfied with "living a comfortable life," i.e., being middle class. (Fournier and Guiry 1991, pp. 16-17) (See Schor 1998, chapter 1, for other evidence about the upscaling of consumer desire.)

The growth of upward comparison means that what we might call the aspirational gap has increased. I define the aspirational gap as the difference between the income required to sustain the consumption pattern to which one aspires and one's actual income. As "upscale" lifestyles increasingly dominate aspirations, the aspirational gap grows. The vast majority of consumers find themselves structurally frustrated, because their incomes are always inadequate to satisfy their desires. Whereas in the past, the aspirational gap might have been on the order of 20%, it is now much higher. (One survey of U.S. households found that the level of income needed to fulfill one's dream, i.e., satisfy aspirations, doubled between 1986 and 1994, and is currently more than twice the national median household income. See Schor 1998, chapter 1.) One can speculate about the relationship between the aspirational gap and a range of dysfunctional consumer behaviors which have increased markedly over the same period. I refer here to the

decline in household savings, the rise in credit card debt (especially among higher income households), the growth of shoplifting, the increase in violent crime in order to obtain particular status goods (athletic shoes, leather jackets, designer sunglasses), and the incidence (and possible increase) in compulsive buying syndrome.

The increasing purchase and importance of branded, status goods (as well as their cheap, counterfeit versions) is another indicator of the growing importance of affluent lifestyles. Visible labels appear to have proliferated to a whole range of products which were previously not heavily "branded" or symbolized. (I say appear because I have not yet found academic research on the prevalence of branded goods.)

The previous findings of the HDR (1996) that inequality is increasing on a global scale are worth re-visiting in this context. For the growth of inequality is likely to lead to an upward shift in consumption comparison, and a resulting increase in the aspirational gap.

D. Globalisation and the Aspirational Gap

I have confined my discussion thus far to the ways in which consumption dynamics have changed in the U.S. I believe these developments are also relevant around the globe, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the country. This is for a number of

reasons: the role of American consumer multinationals, the growth of a worldwide popular media and electronic communications system, and global trends in inequality.

The first point is that American consumer products companies are operating around the globe, marketing and advertising Western products in a wide variety of cultures. Consumers are encouraged to give up domestic versions of products; to switch from non-commodified activities (such as teeth cleaning using a tree branch) to commodified provision (tooth brush and paste); or to acquire new products which are available only from Western providers. In Europe this process is most well-developed; but it has been growing substantially in Asia, Africa, and Latin America as well, among both "middle classes" and the poor. We are aware of the most dramatic, and "scandalous" of these examples: the association of infant mortality with formula-feeding; the existence of "comerciogenic malnutrition" as people substitute Coke and potato chips for healthier traditional foods; or the Avon ladies who paddle down the Amazon River inducing poor women to spend large fractions of their meager incomes on cosmetics.¹⁰

But even apart from these dramatic examples, the role of branded Western products is worth considering. While it is certainly true that branded products currently represent only a fraction of total consumption outside the industrialized countries, they are central to the operation of a competitive consumption model, their growth

is laying the groundwork for its proliferation and deepening. Furthermore, other behavioral aspects of the American companies are worth considering. These include the shortening of the product lifecycle; high levels of advertising and marketing relative to production costs (ie., a high symbolic content to goods); an emphasis on what has been called "commodity aesthetics" (ie., high investment in the aesthetics of design); and ecological unsustainability in production and use.

Second, as American and other Western popular media becomes more important around the globe, we can expect it to play an increasing role in setting consumer aspirations. The Western top 20% will increasingly become the aspirational standard around the globe. Just as Americans who are heavy television watchers come to believe that a swimming pool or a luxury car is an American consumption norm, so too will villagers in China or Brazil. An affluent, out-of-reach lifestyle will increasingly seem normal, and hence necessary to attain. A profound structural aspirational gap has already begun and will continue to emerge. That gap will exacerbate pressures from elite and middle class groups to increase their share of national income.

Thus, my view of the current situation is this: On a global basis, consumer culture is intensifying a competitive spending process in which there are no limits, in which a structural, aspirational gap is ubiquitous and growing, and in which alternatives which have

been shown to contribute far more to human development (leisure, savings, public goods) are being crowded out by private status goods. This profound market failure at the heart of contemporary consumer culture must be addressed if human development is to proceed.

D. Research Strategy

How might one flesh out the picture I have painted above? In this section I make some suggestions about the kinds of data which would illustrate various aspects of the story I have told. I do not pretend that these data sources are the easiest to find. Government data rarely identifies brands, or narrow enough commodity categories to be of use. But through various contacts it may be possible to obtain enough proprietary data to provide an engaging picture of some of the kinds of trends I have been discussing. Here are my suggestions.

1. Data on the existence of the competitive spending process. This is a very hard nut to crack. I have done some of my own work on the US which I can share with you, but such an approach is not feasible for your timeline, I don't believe. The one exception is if you can get brand buying data for some products and analyze it, as I did in my cosmetics paper. (I will provide it to you.)

The other way to go is to think specifically about branded goods. You could look for data on fraction of goods which are "branded,"

i.e., have an identifiable brand name identity. For Southern countries, it would be useful to have data on size of the consumer market for Western, branded goods. [Here I would go first to the market research firms and the proprietary data.] If such data is not available, you could settle for data on advertising of consumer products. [You might also call some people at Business Schools for help on what's available and how to access it. Try Susan Fournier at Harvard, in the Marketing Dept. Also Grant McCracken, formerly an academic researcher, now a consultant for Coke, etc. should be an interesting person to approach. Another very interesting person is Malcolm Gladwell at the New Yorker. He is into the latest trends in consumer behavior. He could also probably help with data. Finally, in this vein, I would contact a few advertising people and sit down with them for some discussions. They should be able to steer you towards good data. I don't have contacts myself, but you might call Mark Crispin Miller (a prominent ad critic, was at Johns Hopkins. He should have some ideas for contacts.)]

How about something on the high symbolic content of some products, eg, athletic shoes? Get the data on Nike's production costs versus promotion costs (\$150 shoes cost about \$1 to make.) Do a box on this which highlights both the costs to consumers of creating the symbols, the exploitative conditions for the producers, and the hypocrisy of the company.

In this vein, I would also focus on some youth issues. The growth

of materialism and immersion in the commercial culture is greatest among youth. McCracken has been looking at youth, I believe.

2. Data on upscaling of consumption aspirations or even more broadly (and easier to get) on extent of materialism among the population. [There is the European Values Survey, and comparable data for the US and Japan. Call Ronald Englehart at Michigan and ask for his help in locating survey data on consumer aspirations.] This is easier.

3. Data on popular media consumption, and the content of popular media. (Fraction of shows exported which show affluent lifestyles, data on television viewing around the world. [Ask Neillson people. Advertising data should also be useful here.]

4. Data on dysfunctional outcomes of the competitive spending model: expansion of consumer credit, trends in savings rates, personal bankruptcy rates. Also, data on criminal behavior related to consumption. (shoplifting, larceny, etc.) And data on compulsive shopping. Exists for the US [ask Ronald Faber, University of Minnesota. He would probably know about Europe.]

5. On reduced product lifecycles, you might contact companies directly for help. Try Proctor and Gamble. Or Unilever. Phillips or Sony. Or the sneaker companies. How long do their models stay on the shelves?

6. Contact Adbusters. They ran a piece recently on the existence of "Genuine Progress Indicators" (ie., alternatives to GDP) in a variety of countries. If you have a section whose message is "consumption does not create human welfare," these would be great additions. (The Autumn 1997 issue of Adbusters reports on the Australian measure, and says that 8 think tanks have a joint effort on this--including UK, USA, Germany, and Sweden).

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1. I will use the word goods as a shorthand for goods and services.
2. Of course, other structural characteristics, such as age, sex, locale, and ethnicity also structure consumption. Some of these characteristics are theoretically rather unproblematic (locale, age); others are theoretically quite important (sex, ethnicity). I do not address these in this paper.
3. This is not to say that Bourdieu's structuralism has no limits--he also allows for individual variation through the concept of the habitus. (The habitus is a set of social conditionings, or "open set of dispositions," the mental schema that individuals use for subjectively processing the objective world around them.)
4. Note describing these classification schemes.
5. See Frances Stewart's paper for the HDR on the importance of the continual expansion in consumption.
6. The issue of "reference groups" (i.e., the identity of the j's) is not well understood. With whom are people comparing themselves? It has been often noted that comparisons are made locally, rather than globally. In related research we are gathering empirical evidence on the constitution and dynamics of reference groups. See Schor 1998, forthcoming. See also Tefertiller 1994 on reference groups among middle-income American teens, and the impact of a national mass media on the formation of reference groups. See also Festinger 1954, Park and Lessig 1977, Bearden and Etzel 1982, and Bearden, Netemeyer and Teel 1989, among others.
7. The extent of visibility is not purely inherent in a good, but is also a product of the efforts of marketers. See James 19XX and Schor 1998, chapter 2.
8. Tourism is an interesting case of a formerly low visibility good which has increasingly become a status product, in part because of the prevalence of "markers" (souvenirs) to show that one has taken a particular trip.
9. On consumption restraints in primitive societies, see Campbell 19XX and Belk 19XX.
10. NPR transcript. The woman profiled in this piece spent 10% of her monthly income on one Avon product.