

# Acknowledging Consumption (Material Cultures)

## Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods

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Cultural meaning in a consumer society moves ceaselessly from one location to another. In the usual trajectory, cultural meaning moves first from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods and then from these goods to the individual consumer. Several instruments are responsible for this movement: advertising, the fashion system, and four consumption rituals. This article analyzes the movement of cultural meaning theoretically, showing both where cultural meaning is resident in the contemporary North American consumer system and the means by which this meaning is transferred from one location in this system to another.

Consumer goods have a significance that goes beyond their utilitarian character and commercial value. This significance rests largely in their ability to carry and communicate cultural meaning (Douglas and Isherwood 1978; Sahlin 1976). During the last decade, a diverse body of scholars has made the cultural significance of consumer goods the focus of renewed academic study (Belk 1982; Bronner 1983; Felson 1976; Furby 1978; Graumann 1974-1975; Hirschman 1980; Holman 1980; Leiss 1983; Levy 1978; McCracken 1985c; Prown 1982; Quimby 1978; Rodman and Philbert 1985; Schlereth 1982; Solomon 1983). These scholars have established a subfield extending across the social sciences that now devotes itself with increasing clarity and thoroughness to the study of "person-object" relations. In this article, I propose to contribute a theoretical perspective to this emerging subfield by showing that the meaning carried by goods has a mobile quality for which prevailing theories make no allowance.

A great limitation of present approaches to the study of the cultural meaning of consumer goods is the failure to observe that this meaning is constantly in transit. Cultural meaning flows continually between its several locations in the social world, aided by the collective and individual efforts of designers, producers, advertisers, and consumers. There is a traditional trajectory to this movement. Usually, cultural meaning is drawn from a culturally constituted world and transferred to

a consumer good. Then the meaning is drawn from the object and transferred to an individual consumer. In other words, cultural meaning is located in three places: the culturally constituted world, the consumer good, and the individual consumer, and moves in a trajectory at two points of transfer: world to good and good to individual. The Figure summarizes this relationship. In this article I propose to analyze this trajectory of meaning, taking each of its stages in turn.

Appreciating the mobile quality of cultural meaning in a consumer society should help to illuminate two aspects of consumption in modern society. First, such a perspective encourages us to see consumers and consumer goods as the way-stations of meaning. In this manner, we focus on structural and dynamic properties of consumption that have not always been emphasized. Second, the "trajectory" perspective asks us to see such phenomena as advertising, the fashion world, and consumption rituals as instruments of meaning movement. We are encouraged to acknowledge the presence of a large and powerful system at the heart of modern consumer society that gives this society some of its coherence and flexibility even as it serves as a constant source of incoherence and discontinuity. In sum, this perspective can help to demonstrate some of the full complexity of current consumption behavior and to reveal in a more detailed way just what it is to be a "consumer society."

### LOCATIONS OF CULTURAL MEANING: THE CULTURALLY CONSTITUTED WORLD

The original location of the cultural meaning that ultimately resides in consumer goods is the culturally

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