

# THE STORY OF OUR ‘STUFF’

## How we bought our way into consumerism

The exact point at which people started buying and using stuff they fancied, but didn't need to survive, is vague. However, as **Neil Osborne** highlights, the consumerist life we're now living is only the latest chapter in quite a long story.



IF YOU DIG deep enough, it seems we have a 500+ year history of wanting things that we simply don't need. Of course we've always had things – using them not just for survival, but also ritual, display and fun. However, the acquisition, flow and use of possessions has scaled to such a degree that consumerism has become a defining feature of our identities and lives.

Generally, consumerism is associated with the boom in consumer goods and mass media in post-war America – but that wasn't its birthplace. That was merely an acceleration of trends going back centuries before the Mad Men of Madison Avenue started driving demand. It's also not a solely American story, because pockets of consumer culture had emerged across the globe several times prior, including Renaissance Italy, Ming-era China and both Imperialistic England and Holland.

Regardless of its origins though, we love our 'stuff.' And our society didn't become this way overnight. To be able to buy lots of things, we needed production, retailing and communication to all be on a grand, dare I say mass, scale.

So let's start the journey...

### Transformation of desire

Five hundred years ago, societies lived within their limited local resources. Most people produced only what they could use or sell close by, and bought only what their neighbours had to offer. The market was one of scarcity. There was little money, rigid class structure, and a life of subsistence.

Between the 15th and 18th centuries, global trade expanded in dramatic and unprecedented ways. Criss-crossing Europe, China, Britain, India and the New World, trade routes opened and sparked a transformation that was as much material, as it was cultural. This new era of global exchange had a profound effect on daily life. At a time when the average person had never held a fork, let alone owned one, possessions became more numerous and accessible.

In his 1776 book, *The Wealth of Nations*, author and economist Adam Smith announced that “Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production.” No truer words were written. Over the next three hundred years, the world moved from being producer-oriented through to manufacture-oriented, and to consumer-oriented.

### Shopping is born

At this point, nothing was produced at scale, therefore there were no 'options' to shop.

People had few possessions, with the average wardrobe consisting of a pair of shoes, a set of day clothes and work clothes. The wealthy had many more possessions, but they certainly didn't shop for them. Clothing was custom made, dinnerware was a family heirloom, and art inherited or commissioned. Generally, items were valued for their quality, durability and longevity, and the idea of something being cheap, disposable or portable didn't exist.

The Georgian period (1714 to 1830) of our story encompasses the Industrial Revolution (1760-1830), when society and industry were transformed from hand production to machine-based work. During this period, which is often described as the 'age of manufacturing,' a dizzying array of new 'stuff' became available in small, specialist stores. For the first time, mass-produced, cheaper varieties of many household items were within the grasp of ordinary working men and women. People began enjoying the benefits of a 'consumer revolution'.

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For the average person, that revolution meant they no longer needed to hand-produce everything they needed to survive. They had time available. Taverns, inns, and coffee houses sprang up and, with the rapid growth of towns and cities, shopping became part of everyday life. For the first time, the purchase of goods became a cultural activity in its own right, giving people new opportunities to identify themselves through their tastes and purchases.

### Stores and purse power

With imperial expansion into India, the Far East and the Americas, faster steamships and higher wages, consumption further increased, with Britain leading the charge. The end of the 19th century saw the arrival of the department store – epitomised by the Bon Marché (1852) in Paris and Harrods (1895) in London – with lavish window displays and collections of goods. Previously undreamt-of goods such as tableware, home furnishings, gramophones and radios became available and our consumption continued its upward path.

While department stores didn't invent the art of shopping, these cathedrals of consumption were important for their effect on widening its popularity, and providing delightful spaces for browsing, especially for women. Intriguingly

though, it wasn't these galleries that brought people together as collectives. It was, instead, their fight for ethical consumerism that shaped them into powerful groups. By 1910, most working class families and every fourth household in England was a member of a consumer cooperative, with the Women's Co-operative Guild the largest women's movement of the time.

These consumer collectives gave women a new-found public voice and visibility. It was also their first taste of politics and showed them the power of the people (and dollar). The 'women with the baskets' (the accepted name for working-class housewives), did the majority of shopping, so they used the power of their purses to target sweatshops and reward businesses that offered decent working conditions and a minimum wage. These movements taught women two things: that they had a voice, and their role as civic-minded consumers could be a powerful weapon – one that was used well – in their ensuing battle for the vote.

### Buy now, pay later

Consumption has been the driving force behind the US economy since its creation. The methods used by corporations, manufacturers and even the government, to prompt people to buy may have changed, but the target has always been consumption.

During the post-WWI period, American industries were searching for ways to keep their production levels high. Consumerism answered their call. New products, and their advertising, deluged buyers. When General Motors made it possible for people to buy cars 'on time' (or on credit) with affordable monthly payments, a new 'credit' mentality spread, and Americans began using the new credit plans on just about everything.

Throughout the 1920s, chain stores such as J.C. Penny and Sears began expanding across America. It's also during this period that the 'keeping up with the Joneses' mentality and the American consumer culture is commonly thought to have been born – spurred on by General Motors introduction of yearly model changes for cars. People soon wanted the latest 'everything' and advertising of the time preyed on the human fear of 'missing out' to create market demand.

Social historian, Stuart Ewen, recounts in his book *PR!* (1996) that, during the 1930s, the US-based National Association of Manufacturers enlisted a team of advertisers, marketers, and psychologists to formulate a massive, ongoing campaign which equated consumerism with “The American Way.” From then on, the country's progress was framed entirely in economic terms and for the first time, people were referred to in newspapers, magazines and radio as 'consumers'.



People were bombarded with advertisements and promotions that continually reminded them it was their duty to contribute to the economy by purchasing factory-made products. Business boomed.

Consumerism may have been orchestrated and driven by corporate America, but the government played its part in fuelling the scheme. After WWII, government support for increased consumer spending was formalised with the adoption of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the nation's primary measure of economic success and all government agencies increased their use of the now ubiquitous term, consumer.

All that was needed was a way for people to afford all these new symbols of modernity. Initially, credit cards had been store-specific, but in the 1950s, Frank McNamara founded Diner's Club and in doing so, revolutionised the market by making it possible to use one card in several places. Advertised as a convenience for traveling salesmen, the “Charge it!” concept quickly took hold and spread, further feeding the driving needs of consumerist society and raising personal debt to unprecedented levels.

### Mad Men market boom

With millions of men in the armed services during WWII, women went to work and goods were rationed. The common saying was “Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without.” At war's end and after years of hardship, families were poised to resume consumerism with a vengeance. They bought bigger houses and at the government's urging, embraced consumerism by filled those houses with 'stuff' that kept the economy and industries running in high gear.

Between 1945 and 1949, Americans purchased 20 million refrigerators, 21.4 million cars, and 5.5 million stoves – consuming one third of the world's goods and services. During the 1950s the American economy grew by 37 per cent and by the end of the decade the median American family had 30 per cent more purchasing power than they'd had at the beginning.

As Americans continued to consume, goods took on another level of importance. The type

of item, its price and look changed from being a good on the market, to a material representation of its owner. What you bought and what you wore told society how you wanted to be portrayed. This marked a new era of consumerism that has rolled on virtually unopposed, to the present day.

During the 1950s, television was the newest medium and advertising drove consumer demand into a frenzy. In 1949, 250,000 televisions were being bought every month. Product placement was well used, with the most popular TV shows (*I Love Lucy* and *Father Knows Best*) set in a house filled with all the latest consumer goods.

### Shopping centres emerge

With the growth of suburbia, a shift in shopping habits occurred – from shopping in downtown stores to suburban shopping centres. The ability to drive and park easily, more night hours, improved store layouts, increased self-service and simplified credit all preyed on our need for shopping convenience. Fast forward several decades, and the shopping centre phenomenon has taken on an even bigger persona, one that combines shopping and entertainment. The trend of shopping for sheer enjoyment was born.

During the 1960s, commercials encouraged free lifestyles with portable hair curlers and blow dryers. Women were shown they need not be tied to motherly chores like cooking, with the appearance of microwave ovens and packet cake mixes aiding their transition. Advertising preyed on the male psyche as well. Men needed to drink, smoke, dress like James Bond, and drive a sports car.

From the 1970s onward, technology increasingly impacted our consumerism. Video recorders freed people from being slaves to television schedules and the computers used to fly men to the moon were the forerunners of personal computers and reinvented as today's laptops, tablets and smart phones. With this, our limited hours of consumerism have similarly been revolutionised, to 24/7 access. E-commerce has shifted the way people purchase their goods and services – forever affecting our relationship between shopping, technology and society with markets, choice and competition now seen to be the consumer's best friend.

### Thanks again, Boomers

Over the centuries, women have always carried the greatest share of buying (and selling) duties for households. But it was the Baby Boomer women (born 1946-1964) who made the greatest gains in the wake of our consumerist pursuit.

Aided by their higher education, they were the first generation to broaden their horizons beyond the secretary, teacher and nursing careers that were available to their mothers. Those same women made dual-income households the norm. As a result, women's purchasing power has grown to handle more than 85 per cent of all purchasing decisions, including items targeted at men, children and the elderly – all of whom they care for and manage.

Why is that important? For any consumer business, that means you need to recognise that women are multiple markets in one. They are the gateway to everybody else's consumerist life. So you need to understand them. Really understand them.

Because... buying all this 'stuff' hasn't ever really been about the stuff. It's always been about how things made you feel. ■



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