Chapter 5

The explosion of consumerism in Western Europe and the United States

We have seen that a consumer revolution occurred in the eighteenth century, and that it carried the seeds of geographical expansion, particularly in the impact on the United States. Development then slowed for a bit, as Western Europe assimilated the first stages of the industrial revolution and the United States caught up with European consumerist standards. A second stage of consumerism subsequently burst forth from about 1850 onward. The theme was simple but profound: in virtually every conceivable way, consumerism accelerated and intensified on both sides of the Atlantic. This chapter traces this process, which also proved vital to consumerism’s larger world impact.

The story has a number of highlights. The apparatus of consumerism changed, as shops and wordy advertisements were increasingly replaced by new retail outlets and a still-more manipulative advertising style. The range of goods involved expanded to include the first “consumer durables” – big ticket items, compared to the clothing and furniture interests that of course persisted as well. Leisure entered the consumer orbit for the first time in any full sense. And the human needs expressed in consumerism also changed, as the process of acquisition and accumulation began to address a wider range of problems. Even the nature of consumerist theft changed, as a sign of intensification.

There were continuities, of course, for modern consumerism has some standard features. Some historians who have worked on the eighteenth-century revolution have tended to assume that consumerism, once launched, simply developed along lines of inevitability. But this new stage is sufficiently different that it must be separately treated. And it must also be separately explained, in part at least: what caused people to stake more on consumerism than they had in the earlier, more exploratory phase?

Finally, this chapter treats a few other interpretive issues. Gender is one. More clearly than in the initial phase, consumerism began to be pinned on women. The attribution was inaccurate, but it must be addressed. Social class and race formed other consumerist factors, though as always some aspects of consumerism blurred social divisions.
The time period treated in this chapter is a long one. Early symptoms of consumerism’s intensification emerged before 1850. The symptoms accelerated fairly steadily into the 1920s, when much of the characteristic contemporary apparatus of consumerism was either fully established or at least clearly sketched. There would be further change even in the transatlantic home of modern consumerism, which we will pick up in a later chapter, but the implications of a fully developed consumer society were plainly visible by this point. Even the Great Depression of the 1930s would only interrupt the phenomenon, and incompletely at that.

Two final complexities require emphasis. In dealing with intensification, this chapter risks assuming a straightline development from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. This would be extremely misleading. A large number of groups were still too poor to participate significantly in consumerism, even after World War II. One estimate, for example, suggests that only five percent of all shopping in 1900 was done in department stores; the rest focussed on more conventional sales outlets, some of them more involved with necessities than with consumerist items. Major events often sidetracked consumerism as well: consumerism plummeted during the world wars (though more in Europe than in the United States). In Germany by 1917, avoiding hunger was a far more pressing daily goal for many people than consumerism was. There was a basic trend, but it was hardly uniform across the social hierarchy or across time.

Nor – and this was the final complexity – was it entirely uniform across place, even within the Western world. Continental West Europeans had more debates about consumerism than Americans or Britons did; there were more hesitations about some of the newest kinds of stores, that seemed to compete with worthy shopkeepers or that seemed to sacrifice artistic qualities for cheap price and debased mass taste. The fact that countries such as France still had large peasant populations, more attached to land than to consumerism, also caused differentiation. The United States, with its huge national market, was more conducive to mass advertising than most European countries were during most of this period. Common trends existed, particularly compared to many other parts of the world, but it is vital to avoid a sense of absolute homogenization. One of the reasons that mounting “Americanization” would seem so jarring to many Europeans after World War II was that American-style consumerism had not previously conquered the Western terrain.

The department store

Just as the shop heralded the first phase of consumerism, so the department store came to symbolize the second phase. More than symbols were involved: in the larger cities, themselves containing a growing minority of the overall population in the Western world, the department store was an
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The first department store opened in Paris in the 1830s. It was really an agglomeration of clothing shops, clustered so that shoppers would have more to attract them. Gradually, department stores added a wider array of goods, such as kitchenware, furniture, and toys, though clothing and related items remained central.

The key to the department stores, besides the array of goods, was display and mass. Consumer items were laid out in profusion, deliberately designed to tempt the purchaser's appetite. This was the retail version of a factory, with items arranged with machine-like precision. The result was what one historian has called a "dream world" of material luxury. Materialism was the lure. Unlike the old-fashioned shop (which of course persisted, though amid great anxiety for the future), store clerks were instructed not to socialize. There was no easy familiarity, though clerks were also told how to manage customers to make them ready to buy.

However anonymous the atmosphere, department stores added important ingredients to the act of shopping. Many people now went to department stores as much for the experience as with any particular purchase in mind. Young couples might stroll through the store simply for recreation.

Department stores sedulously promoted novelty. Obviously they heralded new products and fashions, trying to persuade people that even if they had something, they should visit again for a newer model. Window displays were changed frequently, to associate products with holidays or other lures. Of course the stores advertised widely, but they also sought additional forms of promotion. Macy's, the great New York store, thus introduced the Thanksgiving Day parade in 1924, to call attention to Christmas buying on a day not usually associated with commercialism.

Department stores spread quickly from their Parisian origins. They could be found in most big cities in Western Europe and the United States by the 1850s. They even began to spread to Russia, and would later arise in other parts of the world as well. Clearly, consumerism had reached a stage where the number of goods and the range of appetites had combined to require a new retail palace.

The department store was not the only change in the apparatus of consumerism. In the United States, catalogs began to appear, designed for mail order sales to rural and small-town customers. The catalog offered an even broader range of goods than the department store, for a time including even prefabricated homes available from outlets such as Sears and Roebuck. Pictures in the catalog were not elaborate, but they added an eye-catching element, particularly in the fashion arena, that could draw rural people farther into the consumer orbit.

Also from the United States, initially in the last decades of the nineteenth century, came the "dime store" – stores with cheap consumer items, including
cosmetics and, often, some clothing, aimed at masses of urban buyers who needed better prices and more widespread locations than department stores offered. The stores provided access to some consumerism for elements of the urban lower classes. These kinds of stores spread fairly readily to Britain. On the continent, however, they encountered more resistance, partly because they were foreign, partly because—to critics—their products seemed not only cheap but tasteless. During the 1920s and 1930s considerable debate about these stores occurred in countries such as France, where new national chains—such as the Monoprix, or "single price," largely pre-empted foreign rivals and where owners could claim that they were paying more attention to style and to "Frenchness" than their English and American counterparts.

Advertising changed greatly. In the first place, explicit advertising agencies were launched. The United States headed the parade here too, in the 1870s; the first French agency would follow only in 1922. But even when expertise remained in-house, the nature of advertising shifted rapidly. New printing techniques involved more visual display. Colorful posters touted shows and products. Magazines offered alluring fashion poses, and even newspapers added product imagery. When words were used, they began to appear in bolder typeface, with a simplified text open to people whose literacy was shaky and designed to appeal to an emotional, more than a reasoned response. Furthermore, written texts themselves were altered to embrace more value-laden phrases, as opposed to more straightforward product descriptions. Silk goods, for example, were still discussed in utilitarian terms in newspaper ads as late as the 1890s; paragraphs would emphasize economical price, durability, and quality. But the tone changed by 1900: new silk stockings were "alluring," "bewitching"—"to feel young and carefree, buy our silk."

Advertising was not confined to conventional media. Certain products could be promoted through the growing school system. Thus soap companies, by the 1920s, managed to enlist school authorities in hygiene programs that would expand sales potential. During World War I, American cigarette companies distributed free goods to the troops, a patriotic gesture that won them favorable attention and also gave tens of thousands of former soldiers a lifelong habit.

Changes in media ultimately included the radio, a potent source of advertising that could reach directly into the home and also attract illiterate children, not only building their demands for particular childhood products but also converting them to a deep sense that consumerism was an appropriate expression whatever the age.

Other consumer apparatus developments included more extensive credit facilities. Americans, in particular, began to reduce their savings levels and accumulate more consumer debt by the early 1900s.

The question arises, of course, about the growing power of manipulation. To what extent were new levels of consumerism simply the result of the
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The undeniable acceleration in the power to create demand? The question is harder to answer during this phase of consumerism than it was during the pioneering phase, precisely because the commercial appeals were more varied, sophisticated, and omnipresent. Most historians who have examined advertising conclude, however, that improvements in manipulation were not the whole story. Advertisements and department or chain store lures might persuade people to buy a particular product; they did not, by themselves, persuade them to increase their stake in consumerism more generally. Indeed, not all advertising campaigns succeeded. Advertisers often found that they were trying to determine existing values, around which they could base their appeals. The changes in the apparatus of consumerism were important; they had definite impact; but they still must be combined with the other factors involved.

**Consumer goods**

Needless to say, the array of consumer products expanded steadily. Sources included a widening array of imports, such as the rapidly-expanding silk industry in Japan or the fast-growing rug manufacturing in Turkey (including some factories as well as greater numbers of artisanal workers). But there were more consumer items produced in Western factories as well. Some of them benefited from entirely new materials, such as plastic (introduced around 1850), vulcanized rubber, photographic film, and (in the early twentieth century) artificial fibers such as rayon and nylon.

By 1900, many companies had research units designed to introduce consumer product modifications. Chemical companies in Germany pioneered this approach, but it spread rapidly. Some industrial research involved products destined for other business operations, such as fertilizers for commercial agriculture. But researchers also worked on consumer items. The result was not only new products, but also modifications of familiar staples so that the characteristic label "new and improved" could be tacked on. Many companies began building what came to be called "planned obsolescence" into their output. Automobiles became an expensive but successful case in point. After some effort to introduce standardized designs that would have the appeal of durability, car makers by the 1920s and 1930s began to introduce annual model changes, often largely cosmetic, that would persuade people that what they had purchased if not last year, at most three years before, was hopelessly out of date. The technique was not really new, for clothing fashions had involved the same principles of eager novelty. But now the approach was being applied more widely, to a greater range of products and to more expensive ones.

But it was the growing range of consumer goods that constituted the main point. Clothing and adornment continued to be important. Increasing sales of cosmetics, and new items such as deodorants, added to this list, particularly
by the 1920s. Household furnishings commanded attention as well. The addition of the piano to the must-buy items, for middle-class homes, showed how innovation could swell this product category. By the later nineteenth century the advent of home appliances constituted yet another important and costly opportunity.

Food also drew consumerist attention. The habit of dining out in restaurants expanded gradually. The 1920s saw the introduction of working-class restaurants for pleasure, such as the fish and chips shops in England or, just slightly later, hamburger joints in the United States. Another revealing sign of food consumerism, particularly widespread in the United States, involved snacking. Commercial snack manufacture began in the 1880s, in the form of items such as crackers. Initially, the products were touted in terms of health — “convenient, palatable and healthful” foods that could be packed by “bicyclists, tourists and students”; they were also produced in clean surroundings. But over time the appeals became increasingly sensual: snacks should be consumed because they tasted good and there was no point in suffering a moment’s hunger. Ancillary products also gained ground, such as chewing gum and, in the tobacco realm, the cigarette.

Transportation focused growing consumer attention as well, spurred both by novel products and by the growing size of cities. The introduction of easily ridden bicycles launched a major craze in the 1870s and 1880s, in both Europe and the United States. Everyone in the middle class had to have one. Bicycle clubs formed, touring wide stretches of the countryside on both sides of the Atlantic and also pushing for better roads. Bicycle racing groups became a staple in Europe, often forming in association with a neighborhood bar. Bikes became integral to courtship, as couples could out-pedal any adult chaperones. As with the best consumer innovations, bicycles also prompted other changes in buying habits. Women, particularly, needed new clothes to ride a bike, and confining Victorian skirts yielded to less formal, more athletic gear.

But of course the big-ticket consumer item par excellence became the automobile, introduced around the turn of the century. Car purchases began at the top of the social scale but quickly spread downward, reaching American farmers by the 1910s and beginning to penetrate the working class soon thereafter. Even Hitler in Germany, not for the most part a promoter of consumerism, introduced the people’s car, or Volkswagen, in the 1930s.

Consumer items destined for children also proliferated. Manufactured toy soldiers were a hot ticket around 1900, in various social groups. Dolls became more varied. The introduction of soft, cuddly animal dolls — including the teddy bear, named after President Theodore Roosevelt, though imitating earlier innovations in Germany — spread consumerism to the infant age bracket. Balls and other sports equipment spread widely among boys. Books were now written not only for children, but also for children as
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buyers, and parents did not always approve. Cheap, simple novels, called penny dreadfuls in England, featured adventure stories or westerns, and were designed for sheer escapism.

Consumerist leisure

One of the huge growth areas in this second phase of consumerism involved commercial leisure. The genre was not entirely new, of course, but now it virtually took command of the time not devoted to work or rest.

Traditionally, most leisure had involved customary group activities, for example festivals, or more spontaneous behaviors such as singing or chatting at work. These forms had declined with industrialization, because they interfered with the regularity of factory life. In their place, two major leisure forms developed: participant activities that often required consumer equipment, and spectator leisure, the consumerist form par excellence.

Consumer products now supplemented children's and adult play in many ways. Sports now demanded balls, mitts, and other store-bought products. Music benefited from the growing availability of instruments to interested purchasers. Dancing spread in commercial dance halls – there were sixty-eight halls in Paris by 1860. Eager tourists could now sign up for commercial tours, with agencies such as Thomas Cook (formed in England in the 1840s) or the American Express (1870s); and of course they could buy guidebooks.

Day excursions to the beach, organized by train companies, brought commercial leisure travel even to the working class. Pictures from the 1880s show European workers crowding the beaches, dressed fairly formally both because specialized swimwear was another generation away (when it would become an important consumer item) and because most people did not know how to swim. But the beaches were soon surrounded by pleasure galleries in which people could supplement their exposure to nature by buying games, looking at freak shows, and snacking.

Commercial performances for spectators loomed even larger. Professional sports began to organize in the 1850s, and spread steadily. The first adult soccer football club formed in England in 1858, and leagues developed in the next decade. Professional baseball arose in the United States at about the same time. In addition to sport, popular music hall (called vaudeville in the United States) drew people from various social groups to watch singers, comics, and dance routines. These entertainment forms served as the basis for the first movies, which began to draw audiences around 1900. By 1920, the average American family was attending at least one movie a week, and Europeans were not far behind. Even newspapers promoted the new passion for leisure. They featured sports sections and entertainment sections, linked to advertising. But they also provided escapism on their own, by featuring a variety of human interest subjects such as titillating crimes, disasters or exotic items such as the Loch Ness monster. American
papers also introduced the comic strip. People increasingly expected to be entertained by buying pleasure from commercial outlets – the essential definition of consumerist leisure. In the United States, the amusement park provided another widely popular source of consumerist leisure. The Ferris wheel was invented in the 1890s, and the roller coaster soon followed.

Even sex became a spectator sport in part. The advent of pornographic postcards spread sexual imagery more widely than ever before. Women's bodies, sometimes portrayed in exotic "native" settings, formed the prime subject matter here. Cheap novels used sexual themes as well as violence, a combination which quickly became a consumer staple. Sex was also increasingly linked to advertising. Some bars featured nudes in their outdoor signs, and products such as German Bitters, sold in the United States, had a bare-breasted woman in the background as early as 1885.

The triumph of consumerist leisure simultaneously transformed recreation and greatly extended the reach of consumerism overall. Few people in Western Europe or the United States, by 1900, did not expect to spend part of their day watching, reading or listening to some product designed to entertain them. This association of daily free time with consumer behavior was a first in human history.

Consumerist leisure extended another key quality of the whole phenomenon: the embrace of faddism. Just as fashions shifted, and car models changed, so did leisure enthusiasms. Dance styles oscillated with bewildering regularity. During the early twentieth century they went from the tango and waltz to the shimmy, then the Charleston and black bottom, then the one-step and the waltz again. Sports crazes followed one on the other, though some of the staples held on as well. In the United States the rise of baseball was challenged around 1900 by a new enthusiasm for American football. Popular songs and song styles changed regularly, and of course consumerist leisure generated a regular procession of sports and entertainment stars, taken up with great enthusiasm and then rejected with equal speed when another idol came along. Leisure, once associated with traditional continuity as the basis for community life, now reversed direction: change was essential, and what communities there were formed largely around these shifting commitments.

**Audiences: democratization?**

Consumerism steadily drew more and more groups of people into an increasing array of consumer orbits. Distinctions remained, partly of course because resources varied greatly. A middle-class vacation, or mode of transport, continued to differ greatly from comparable working-class items. Differences in styles based on prior cultures also shaped group choices. One historian has shown how, in the United States, different immigrant groups continued to patronize special food or fashion products that confirmed their group identity, even as they became increasingly consumerist.
Poverty and the uncertainty caused by frequent economic crises also created huge divisions in access to consumerism. People in working-class sections of London or Paris never made it to the fashionable department stores, and many had only infrequent engagement with consumerism of any sort. Many working-class and peasant families concentrated on saving money, and there was any margin, realizing that an increase in unemployment, a period of illness or the process of growing old would demand resources that must not be wasted on consumerism. In many lower-class families, women assumed the special burden of careful frugality—sometimes granting their husbands a bit of beer money to keep them away from more expensive habits. As late as 1946 a British observer, Charlotte Luetkens, noted that "Throughout the centuries, women have been taught the virtue of hoarding and saving—now they have to learn the art of spending."

Nevertheless, some patterns of change emerged, even though there was no uniformity. The growing reach of consumerism, and some homogenizing tendencies across group lines, showed in many ways. The idea of bathing regularly (with the latest advertised soap) and smelling good started in the middle class, but by 1900 it cut across class and ethnic lines. The school campaigns to promote hygiene deliberately sought to use children to press working-class parents to measure up to the best bathing and tooth-brushing standards. By 1930 soap was the second most common grocery item, after bread, to be found in the American home.

Various age groups were drawn in. Consumerism had long been associated with youth and young adulthood, and to some extent this continued: these were the age groups most interested in novelty and often blessed with the greatest disposable incomes. But consumerism also spread, as we have seen, into childhood and even babyhood. The proliferation of toys briefly worried some observers. "Why foster a craving for novelty and variety that life cannot satisfy?" But more experts approved: toys could give young children emotional support. As an American observer put it in 1914, "children's affections have come to center around the toys with which they have lived and played." Anxiety about toys and reading material that were purely entertaining, with no educational value, was largely relieved through buying children still more toys, but with a better cachet: many middle-class parents began to organize playrooms filled with goods—approved goods, but goods, nevertheless. The notion of comforting a young child by buying something new became a standard. Particularly in the United States, the growing middle-class practice of giving allowances, which began in the 1890s, helped create a child consumer market.

More tentatively, consumerism also spread upward in the age bracket. The elderly had never been seen as a consumerist group. This was a time of retrenchment and, often, greater poverty. But by the 1920s some consumer activities began to be organized for older people, including commercial tourism. The full development of consumerism for the elderly would not occur
The emergence of consumerism in the West until the 1950s, but there were earlier hints, at least within the middle classes, for the phenomenon challenged more traditional group boundaries.

Obviously, consumerism spilled across class and ethnic lines. Many Jewish immigrants to the United States, for example, were quickly drawn in, eager to acquire new clothes and other items. One immigrant memoir featured a chapter, "Buy Now, Pay Later — Mama Discovers an American Custom." Consumerism might in fact help immigrants justify their risky commitment to a new land, both to themselves and, through letters and visits, to folks back home. African Americans participated in consumerism when their means permitted, particularly of course in the cities to which many moved during the great migration of the early twentieth century. Cosmetics were widely popular, some designed to make people look less African. But other consumer items featured black entertainers, particularly in the area of music and dance. Even in the nineteenth century a consumerist model for some African Americans had emerged in the model of the sportin' life: men, with women on their arms, dressed in eye-catching clothes and jewelry and up-to-date on the latest entertainment forms.

The involvement of the working class in full-blown consumerism, tempered mainly by still-insecure resources, was one of the key developments in this period. Workers did not accept middle-class consumer standards fully, even when they could afford them. But where resources permitted they did display a similar passion to acquire, and they often gradually compromised with middle-class standards. Movies proved a classic case in point. The violence and low comedy of many movies came from popular entertainment traditions. But specifically working-class themes did not prove durably popular, and middle-class characters predominated after 1920. Furthermore, working-class movie audiences, initially rowdy and noisy in the best popular spectator tradition, soon quieted, accepting other norms of respectability. Yet cross-class consumerist contacts could cut both ways. Many new middle-class commercial leisure interests resulted from patronizing working-class theaters or fashions. "Slumming" could provide an excitement that purely middle-class tastes did not satisfy.

Finally, consumerism continued to cross gender lines, particularly as women moved into consumer areas initially reserved for men. Tobacco smoking was an example: once a classic male consumer preserve, tobacco drew women increasingly after the introduction of the cigarette. Automobiles were initially targeted at men, but here too women's importance as consumers was increasingly recognized, among other things through greater attention to upholstery and design.

In all this, the purveyors of consumerism managed to expand their audiences while combining some common tendencies with special bows to the identities of particular age groups, ethnicities, or each gender. No audience was left untouched, though the rural segments, particularly in the West European peasantry, were drawn in most slowly and hesitantly.
Functions and needs

Attachments to consumerism escalated along with all the more measurable symptoms. A number of cultural forces, initially hostile to consumerism, now aligned themselves (though there was also new opposition, a point discussed in the following chapter). Protestant ministers in the United States had typically railed against the growing signs of consumerism in the first half of the nineteenth century. A minister in 1853 condemned excessive spending, "by the parade of luxury, in eating, drinking and dressing, and almost every indulgence of the flesh." "Man should aspire to more durable riches than those this world can offer." Vestiges of this sentiment continued, as in an attack from the 1870s:

If we spent more time of Sabbath mornings in preparation of the heart than in the adornment of the person, might we not be better able to worship God in the beauty of holiness?

But mainstream Protestantism largely shifted ground, arguing that consumer goods, while not a top priority, were part of God's gifts to mankind. Thus the Presbyterian Banner, a religious weekly, actually began to criticize women who lacked a fashion sense:

If a woman has no natural taste in dress, she must be a little deficient in her appreciation of the beautiful... Indifference, and consequent inattention to dress, often shows pedantry, self-righteousness, or indolence, and... may frequently be noted as a defect.

The paper at this point began accepting fashion ads and even offered a regular column on fashion and "the further importations of French Costumes." Enjoyment of material goods now demonstrated true religious spirit, as against "the accumulated mould of sourness." "When the angels have enlarged and purified your own heart, they will thus secure to you the full unabridged edition of happiness in this world, as well as in world no. 2." "Enjoy the present... the blessings of this day if God sends them."

Evaluation of envy changed as part of this cultural shift, though the process took a bit longer, extending into the twentieth century. Moral authorities conventionally attacked envy as a petty symptom of a poor sense of priorities. Women's apparent eagerness to copy clothing from the upper classes, as in the growing interest in silk stockings, frequently drew adverse comment. Some of these blasts, even in the United States, reflected the longstanding hostility to use of consumerism to blur class lines. Thus working-class women were particularly (and inaccurately) condemned for frivolous spending. The new attachments of rural women to standards gleaned from catalogs were similarly chastised. People should "be content
with what you have,” as one Christian magazine put it in 1890. But the
tone changed after about 1915. American women of all classes began to be
congratulated for dressing so well: “Whatever their background, they seem
to be inspired with what we are told is a typical and standardized
American desire to ‘look like a million dollars.’” While there was vanity
involved, most of it was “innocent . . . wholesale ambition to look one’s
best, to achieve beauty and distinction, to assert good taste and cultivated
selection in clothes.” Advertisers, indeed, began to praise envy directly:
a soap ad thus asked, “The Envied Girl – Are you one? Or are you still
seeking the secret of charm?” Virtue and vice thus were re-evaluated,
and while some of this clearly resulted from the growing power and subtle
tactics of commercial advertisers, there was a real culture shift as well.

Consumerism began to play a role in additional aspects of life. It pe-
trated most holidays. Americans began exchanging commercially-bought
Christmas presents as early as the 1830s, and the focus steadily gained
prominence. By the end of the century, Christmas buying was taking on
huge proportions. Purchasing gifts was meant to convey family emotion.
Valentine’s Day had its own commercial apparatus. The first commercial
cards were introduced in Britain for Valentine’s Day in 1855. The idea of
celebrating birthdays with consumer items was another innovation. After
1900, holidays began to be invented partly for consumerist purposes – but
always with family meaning thrown in. Thus Mother’s Day, proclaimed in
the United States officially in 1914, resulted from a mixture of ardent love
for mothers at the end of a period of intense maternalism, and the machin­
atations of florists, who knew a good thing when they saw one. Indeed, the
leading emotional advocate of Mother’s Day, Anna Jarvis of Philadelphia,
had by 1923 protested against the holiday: “This is not what I intended,
I wanted it to be a day of sentiment, not profit.”

Consumerism began to affect courtship. The idea of bringing simple gifts
as part of courting was not new, but after 1910, again with the United
States in the lead, young couples began to shift from conventional courtship
to a new practice called dating. There were several differences between the
forms, but one key distinction was that dating involved mixing some level
of romance with attendance at a consumerist leisure event, such as a movie.
And the romantic potential began to be evaluated in part by consumer
standards: was the male providing enough? Was the female willing to
reward consumer outlay by some favors in turn?

Consumerism also influenced divorce. Many couples began to quarrel over
deficiencies in living standards: wives blamed husbands for not earning
enough not simply for survival, but for consumer gains, and husbands
attacked wives for shopping inadequacies. “You don’t know enough to buy
your own clothes,” one aggrieved husband charged in Los Angeles in 1882.
while in another case the husband ruefully noted his “inability to support
But the social changes that began to be noticeable in our time seem to have standardized the way we think about vanity. Even cultivated vanity could still be seen as a sign of success and fulfillment. It penetrated our lives and gained emotional significance in commercial society, giving rise to a new idea of love: the consumerist love that focused on the acquisition and display of goods. Gifts and consumer goods became symbols of one's social status and personal worth.

The explosion of consumerism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries brought about new ways of dealing with behavior problems through consumerist manipulation. Advice manuals began to urge parents to use material goods to distract their children from fear or anger. Is a child afraid of a dark room or a stranger? Place a desired consumer object close to the source of fear or anger to lure the child in. Does a child resent a sibling? Buy him something to show your love. And from children: a growing recorded amount of what was now called sibling rivalry often involved resentment that a brother or sister got a new toy. The association of consumer goods with emotional development and guidance grew steadily stronger.

Consumerism even began to affect emotional life directly. Growing opposition to conventional levels of grief began to develop soon after 1900, and a key reason was that grief, by definition a sad emotion, contradicted the kind of pleasure-seeking that consumerism implied. And the signs of grief—the heavy mourning clothes and extended periods of withdrawal—did begin to decline because they did not comport with larger consumerist attitudes.

Not surprisingly, consumerist intensity measurably increased. At an extreme, consumerist thefts now took on the quality of diseased compulsion. The newcomer was kleptomania, which involved thefts from department stores by (mainly) middle-class women who could in fact have paid for the goods they took. This was different in several ways from the consumerist theft patterns of the earlier, eighteenth-century phase, and above all it indicated how much further the consumer appetite could go in deviant cases. The problem affected both sides of the Atlantic. A Frenchwoman talked of going into department stores in a “genuine state of joy,” as if she were meeting a lover. Another noted that she got more pleasure from her thefts than “from the father of her children.” Simply handling fabrics such as silk could give intense sensual pleasure. And the passion simply could not be controlled. A woman who stole some alpaca wool, worth 43 francs, admitted that “the idea of possessing it had dominated her to the point of subjugating her will and her reason.” English and American authorities, both legal and medical, identified the same kind of diseased reactions from the 1870s onward. The cases were atypical, prompted by mental illness of some sort, but the deviance did suggest how far consumerism could reach into personal life.
Causes revisited

Why did consumerism escalate so widely in this period? Some of the issues are familiar by now. A key factor involved changes in methods of production and distribution. European and American manufacturers were now capable of expanding their output to the point that selling it became an increasing problem. Mounting international competition and periodic economic recessions – a bad one hit in the 1870s, for example – drove this point home. Small wonder that there was growing pressure to make people believe they must buy a growing array of goods. The range of goods themselves expanded, as we have seen, which could help explain new levels of desire. And new technologies, for example in printing or otherwise conveying visually-dramatic advertising, amplified this kind of inducement. Part of the new consumerism resulted from new economic issues and technical means. Even kleptomania followed in part from the unprecedented existence of department stores, where the method of displaying goods facilitated theft and deliberately inflamed desire.

As before, the manipulation and apparatus of consumerism were not the whole story. By this point in Western history, a second set of factors resulted simply from consumerism’s increasing familiarity. Many people now assumed that consumerist responses were appropriate, simply because the necessary ideas and behaviors had been around so long. This showed clearly, for example, in the increasing parental reliance on buying goods to help deal with their children. Because adults indulged in acquisition so often, there was only slight hesitation in coming to assume that children should do so. And of course the more consumer expectations were planted in childhood, the fuller their expression once adulthood loomed. Consumerism, in other words, was by this point feeding itself.

Many historians have also focussed on a third set of factors, which involves looking at new levels of consumerism as compensations for problems in other aspects of life. A set of causes involved in the first stage of consumerism, in other words, had some new counterparts by the late nineteenth century.

Three scenarios were involved. The first embraced workers, including (particularly in the United States) many immigrants. The unpleasantness of much industrial work had long been recognized. Gradually, some of the workers involved decided that, while the unpleasantness could not be reversed directly, it could be mitigated if labor could bid for a better life off the job. Work became less a goal in itself than an instrument for other gains. This instrumentalist approach first emerged among segments of British labor in the 1850s. It showed particularly in demands for higher wages, to compensate for work burdens, though reductions of hours could involve the instrumentalist approach as well. Goals of this sort readily translated into consumerist interests: for how was a better life off the job to be defined, how were the higher wages and shorter hours to be used, if not
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The issues of product were now periodic. Case people found themselves at levels of conveying. Part of the technical ascendant facilitated were not the assumed necessary for help deal there did so. Childhood, in other problems in consumerism, in the century. Including rationalization, the need for other segments of the higher classes could easily transport, to be used, if not in new acquisitions or consumerist leisure? Obviously, workers did gradually win the kinds of resources that would permit more consumerism—here was a vital precondition for the whole phenomenon, however, not only resources but also new motives were involved.

Something of the same pattern occurred in the middle classes. By the late nineteenth century, many businessmen and professionals such as lawyers could no longer aspire to run their own operations, in the classic entrepreneurial fashion. Rather, they worked for large firms, serving as middle managers in corporations. These jobs might involve acceptable pay, but they were not as intrinsically satisfying, because of the need to work under the direction of other people. So middle-class men needed other outlets to demonstrate success and seek satisfaction, and this made consumerism more palatable. Even so, historians have demonstrated, intensification proceeded cautiously. The middle classes found it difficult to admit a candid new commitment to pleasure seeking. But they could justify leisure, including vacations, that was touted in terms of enhancing the capacity to work. They could buy products that would improve health. They could indulge in acquisitions with a family orientation. These targets easily led to an escalation of consumerism more generally, in a setting in which older satisfactions were becoming more elusive.

A growing new segment of the middle class needed consumer outlets even more directly. Lower-middle-class secretaries, sales personnel, telephone operators and others earned relatively low pay in jobs that were not working class, but involved a great deal of routine. Small wonder that lower-middle-class people were often at the forefront of new consumer interests. In Germany, for example, during the first decades of the twentieth century they led in cigarette smoking, in movie going, and in the purchase of radios. These were not items of great expense, but they did allow a sense of pleasure and identity—and the white-collar group definitely surpassed the working class, even at comparable levels of pay, in their pursuit.

Finally, there were women, particularly middle-class women. Resources increased for this group too, both because of a general if gradual increase in prosperity and because many women in this class now worked for a time before marriage, thus gaining direct access to money and some experience with new levels of consumption. But few women committed to work all of their life, because standards of respectability still argued against this. Women were, however, increasingly well educated. Their birth rates were dropping rapidly, and children spent growing amounts of time in school. These women were by no means idle, but they might well face new problems finding meaningful focus. Enter consumerism, once again, as a means of countering new problems with identity and providing not only new (if sometimes superficial) satisfaction, but also new meaning as well. Women served as the family's chief consumer agent in any event, in the industrial urban economy in which most men worked outside the home. It was not
surprising that this specialization extended to growing engagement with shopping and with acquisition, though as we have seen women could also serve as family gatekeepers against excessive consumerism.

The causes of the full flowering of consumerism in the transatlantic world thus involved the new economic means and techniques of growing corpor­ations; the habituation to consumerism itself, which fostered additional outpouring; and a set of new problems with other goals in life, associated both with work and with homemaking, which pushed consumerism as a surrogate compensation.

**Additional issues**

Consumerism around the turn of the twentieth century continued to involve a number of interesting issues. The old tension between comfort and elegance was redefined. Increasingly, though still in varying degrees, people now opted for comfort. Furniture became more fully upholstered, requiring less rigid posture. Clothing loosened, in part to permit more physical activity. There was even an inconclusive battle over women’s corsets, held by some to be unhealthy as well as unpleasantly tight, by others as essential to preserve an appropriate figure. We will see that comfort did not always prevail, for example, stylish women’s shoes often became less comfortable, but consumerism now encouraged at least an air of relaxation.

Gender was another issue. There is no question that women were particularly associated with this new phase of consumerism. They were the most visible shoppers, at an extreme the characteristic kleptomaniacs. Many critics of consumerism focussed on this gender angle, blaming stores and advertisers for picking on the weaker sex and blasting women for being so vulnerable. Gender wars occurred not only in the press, but, as we have seen, in individual families. Men were also consumerists. They almost certainly spent more on consumer goods than women did, and certainly they controlled more of the resources, but they did consume differently. They may have, on average, taken less pleasure in shopping, and they devoted less time to it. A 1920 study showed that they moved through department stores much faster than women did (and they disliked shopping where women congregated). They actually spent more on clothes. They certainly dominated the consumerist leisure field. They participated in large numbers of clubs and lodges (varying of course by social class, but with widespread involvement) that bought items such as billiard tables and drinking equipment. Many male groups had special uniforms and other fancy goods for display: an American lodge called the Pythians thus in 1887 required a “black silk folding chapeau trimmed with two black ostrich plumes ... a gold tassel on each peak” and so on. Advertisers appealed to men as well as women, though using different outlets such as hunting and outdoor magazines. Overall, consumerism was not gender specific; it embraced both
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Another important set of questions involves consumerism's extent in Western life by the early twentieth century. We have seen how it gained ground in family relationships and in emotions. Did it even more basically color the ways people thought about the world around them? A number of cultural analysts refer to an increasing commodification in popular outlook, through which even phenomena outside the consumerist orbit would be thought of in consumerist terms. An example might be the female body. Women were increasingly featured in advertisements and, of course, for some consumers, in pornography. They were encouraged not only to be fashionable, but also to smell good and, after 1900, to shave legs and underarms as part of escalating beauty standards. Were their bodies seen by men, and possibly by women themselves, as commodities, to be evaluated in some of the same ways that consumer goods were assessed?

A final issue involves the uses of consumerism in protest, where developments in the West would ultimately be matched by innovations elsewhere. Obviously, once a society commits to significant new consumer expenses, it also has a new weapon: withholding those commitments, to protest some social wrong. Not surprisingly, some use of consumer boycotts began early, as in Britain's American colonies. American revolutionaries, dumping British tea in Boston, were saying that reform was more important than regular tea drinking. Anti-slavery movements, particularly in Britain, discussed boycotting products (particularly cotton) that came from slave labor. Boycotting picked up in the acceleration of consumerism after the late nineteenth century. A number of boycotts were directed against products made by sweatshop labor. During the 1920s and 1930s, African Americans, in cities such as Baltimore, used boycotts to protest discrimination in employment and in urban facilities. Boycotts reveal the growing economic and political importance of consumerism — otherwise, withdrawal of purchasing would have had no impact — but also the willingness of key groups periodically to put other goals first. Some boycotts won reforms, others failed — sometimes because not enough people were willing to change their consumer behaviors. An interesting twist on boycotts occurred in the United States in the 1930s. To protest Japanese invasion of China, groups urged a boycott of silk. Here, however, instead of urging sacrifice, promoters argued that other products were just as stylish: one could protest without abandoning consumerism. This may have been yet another indication of the intensification of the whole phenomenon.

Advancing consumerism raises some tough analytical questions. It clearly continued to embrace important tensions, between stylishness and comfort; or male and female; or enjoyment versus protest. And as we will see in the following chapter, it also provoked profound uneasiness. Never before had...
so many people spent so much time working at consuming. Small wonder
that consumerism affected views of the world as well as daily life, or that
it prompted new guilts and anxieties.

International outreach

The escalation of Western consumerism inevitably spilled over into the
wider world. Commercial forces pushing consumerism at home could hardly
avoid the temptation to seek buyers elsewhere. Europeans and Americans
now found consumerism so natural that they took it with them virtually
anywhere they went; even missionaries, deeply devoted to the cause of the
Christian God, brought the apparatus of consumption with them in many
ways. Diplomatic representatives imported the new spectator sports: the
first soccer club in Argentina was formed by British residents in 1867,
leading to a first national league of Argentine teams by the 1890s. American
and European movies were being shown in Africa and Latin America by
1900. Hollywood companies opened international branches quickly. Universal
Studios had 20 such outlets by 1918, in countries such as Indonesia,
Japan, India, and Singapore. By the early 1920s American films controlled
95 percent of the Australian market. We will turn to the larger inter­
national impact in Part II, but it is important to note how its expansion
dovetailed with its unprecedented triumph within the Western world.

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