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The basic premise of this article is that, quite unlike the evolution of consumption patterns in Europe and North America, Third World consumers are often attracted to and indulge in aspects of conspicuous consumption before they have secured adequate food, clothing, and shelter. The most dramatic instance of such 'premature' consumer culture involves sacrificing nutrition for what might well be regarded as the superficial luxury of Western consumption items. The reasons for such a unique development involve the visibility of dramatically different consumption life-styles to Third World consumers, and various factors such as urbanization that bring about altered interpersonal attitudes in the Third World. (103-104)

CONSUMER CULTURE: DEFINITIONS AND ORIGINS

Definitions of consumer culture have often seemed to rule out the possibility that consumer cultures could exist in Third World countries. For instance, some analysts suggest that consumer cultures can exist only where a large majority of a population consumes above basic subsistence levels. But, the notion that consumer cultures may develop only after basic needs are met is based on the problematic assumption that all consumer cultures follow the European and US models of development. An alternate definition with truly global application states that a consumer culture is one "in which the majority of consumers avidly desire (and some noticeable portion pursue, acquire, and display) goods and services that are valued for non-utilitarian reasons, such as status seeking, envy provocation, and novelty seeking." (105)

The description of the rise of consumer culture as a linear progression from poverty to ever greater levels of affluence and from societies preoccupied with necessities to increased indulgence in luxuries is driven by the desire of affluent countries to justify their own consumption patterns. This self-serving history of affluence masks the disturbing growth of consumer cultures in societies in which luxury consumption may occur at the expense of acquiring basic nutritional needs. It also overlooks the historical presence of cultures that had few goods and wants. For example, the nomadic Bushmen of the Kalahari desert lived well in difficult environments by wanting less and working relatively few hours in order to secure their basic material needs.

The consumption patterns that are characteristic of contemporary affluent societies are typically measured quantitatively in terms of income, hours worked, education level, life expectancy, and

other indicators. In a consumer culture, consumers tend to aspire to a standard of living they have not yet achieved; it is the gap between what is desired and what is achieved that constitutes consumer want. While the desired standard of living changes over time and across cultures, Keyfitz has provocatively suggested the impending emergence of a global standard package that includes a home, electric lighting, a refrigerator, a television and an automobile.

There are two types of barriers to the export of consumer culture to the Third World: economic and cultural. The greatest barrier is economic; many Third World countries do not have large cash economies and simply do not have enough income to support a consumer culture. The strongest cultural barrier is fear of envy, a psychological condition that embraces many small-scale societies.

The spread of Western media promotes social comparisons that fuel the development of a hedonistic ethic, especially in large cities. The anonymity fostered by urbanization breaks down traditional attitudes of fearing envy by one's neighbors and, in fact, promotes a "modern" desire to elicit envy from others. Traditionally, envy was to be avoided because it was believed that increases in an individual's welfare occur at the expense of his neighbors. In the modern alternative, envy is acceptable or desirable because it is believed that a community's total wealth expands with the increased wealth of each individual.

EVIDENCE OF THIRD WORLD CONSUMER CULTURE

Examples from around the Third World demonstrate the widespread influence of Western consumer culture. In Africa, traditional indicators of wealth and status are increasingly replaced by Western goods. For instance, in Ghana high-status commercial footwear has become a substitute for ceremonial wear among low-income consumers. The formerly nomadic Dobe Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa have become sedentary and less communal as rising consumption levels have led to more possessions, fences and locked doors. In Central and South America, television sets are coveted by many poor, some of whom will spend as much on a television as they do on the rest of their household goods combined. In China, the most desired types of goods are rapidly escalating and changing to accommodate the most recent innovations from nearby countries and the West.

The problems that accompany current economic development in the Third World should not be considered as an indictment of development in general. However, the spread of consumer culture in poor countries may cause inappropriate consumption sacrifices and choices of technology, disdain for local goods, and a breakdown of feelings of community. Consumption priorities become skewed, as in low-income communities in Brazil where refrigerators are purchased by incurring debt and reducing consumption of food. Automobiles that are owned or desired by a small elite incur public expenses such as expensive road networks that involve the sacrifice of valuable resources for the benefit of a privileged few. Local products become less desirable even when they are lower priced and of higher quality. Community sensibility is destroyed as consumption becomes a more individualized activity.

A different model of consumption is needed to secure the benefits of economic development without the costs of consumer culture for the Third World.