

# Inequality in Consumption

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## Abstract

Inequalities in consumption still exist in today's society and therefore appear as a focus of research in politics and the media. In this paper, I will address the inequalities in gender, race and social class separately. Inequalities exist in most areas, and therefore also in consumer society. At the same time there are close links between these three dimensions, and therefore one is also missing in the study of consumer society.

**Keywords:** gender inequality, racial inequality, social class inequality, cultural omnivorism

## 1. Introduction

After the Industrial Revolution, productivity was emancipated. The demand for goods to satisfy people's needs was so great that we entered an era of material "abundance" and consumer society, which marked the transformation of Western society from a society of production to a society of consumption. This era is characterised by 1) a shift from a Fordist to a post-Fordist mode of production, with a greater emphasis on diversification and individualisation of products than in the mass production of the past. 2) consumption is organised in a more rationalised manner, such as in the world's chain shops and shopping centres. 3) a shift from physical consumption to Symbolic consumption, as the name suggests, has changed somewhat like consumption in a consumer society, where the object of consumption is no longer the physical object but the meaning it brings. Therefore, to become a consumer object, the object must become a symbol. So, in essence, people consuming objects are consuming symbols. At the same time, through various objects, individuals or groups in society seek their place in an order, which to a large extent creates social stratification. Therefore, the consumer society is a vain phenomenon since it is essentially a means for capital to resolve social conflicts. Sociology can be considered the essential discipline for understanding consumption. Then the consumer can be considered an independent, desiring agent, with the difference that consumption in sociology is culturally and socially determined, situating consumption within social structures and social dynamics. Baudrillard (1996) says that all the political games in the welfare state and consumer societies lie in the elimination of the contradictions between them by increasing the total amount of wealth and thus reaching the level of automatic equality and the heaviest balance in the aggregate, i.e., the general level of welfare for all. Furthermore, the central contradiction is the question of equality and inequality. Inequality is significant for understanding contemporary society. Class is one of the most frequently studied elements, and in addition to this, race and gender are also to be focused on. The role of the purveyor of social class has been treated as a necessity over the last few decades, as the dominant sociological approach to consumption has focused on it as a social difference. Hence the introduction of a concept known as 'conspicuous consumption'. Veblen (1899) states that how the wealthy assert their status to maintain their social status, and therefore their status claim, is through stylised consumption, which essentially implies that consumption is a means of displaying status and that consumer goods are therefore instrumental rather than functional. At the same time, Veblen's model shows that people imitate and even copy the consumption patterns of those who are better off than they are to a certain extent, such as how the latest consumer goods such as clothing, housing and cars are disseminated among the population, in a way that essentially creates an unequal social order. This phenomenon is the significant increase in living standards and

economic development in the 20th century. In this paper, therefore, the author wants to examine consumption and social inequality, including gender, race, class and other factors.

## **2. Gender Inequalities in Consumption**

The inequalities that arise in gender are also reflected in consumption. Firstly, it is essential to clearly understand how men and women consume and how they are represented through cultural symbols. Secondly, it is necessary to explore how women are defined as 'objects' in consumer culture, how women become objects of the heterosexual male gaze through cosmetics, dieting, plastic surgery, clothing, etc. Women, therefore, have a dual role in consumption: firstly, to satisfy their own needs and desires, and secondly, to be treated as objects of male sexual desire. The second is to be treated as an object of male sexual desire. In this process, popular culture constructs the consumer subject as an object of consumption. Women are objectified through consumer culture, thus highlighting how consumption produces inequality through the commodification of the female body. O'Brien and Oakley (2015) say that inequality is closely linked to the stratification of society, where the very act of living in a society is linked to the difference between what is valuable and what is not. The distinction between what is valuable and what is not is closely linked. For example, other forms of activity in society, like economic activities, managerial positions, leadership positions, and other occupations, are different from other forms of labour, such as domestic work. The distinction between these forms of labour is most clearly expressed in terms of value, but also the distinction between paid and unpaid labour is also the most apparent expression of gender differences, thus creating a male-dominated economic and productive. This created a male-dominated economic and productive sphere and a female-dominated private activity in which domestic work was performed, which also largely contributed to women becoming a marginalised workforce.

Women's participation in consumption was contradictory to society's time; Stillerman (2015) states that in the late 19th century, middle-class women were legally dependent on their husbands and did not have access to their accounts. Therefore, when they had spending needs, they had to use their husbands' credit cards. Merchants would, therefore, not only encourage them to spend large sums of money but also unite women against their husbands. At the same time, many consumer markets targeted women. Particularly in the post-war period of the last century, when society was in turmoil, but in a period of post-war reconstruction, women tended to spend on labour-saving machines, such as dishwashers and hoovers, as the economy boomed, and incomes increased. This was because women found themselves unable to accept this life as they gradually moved away from the labour market. However, conversely, once financially independent, women could enter the world of consumption to satisfy their desires and needs concerning consumption.

Bordo (2000) states that the image of men and women has changed dramatically throughout society. In the past, men were represented as powerful, strong and sexually assertive, while women were considered to be in a supportive role in the family. However, the new role of women in this period is one of sexual confidence and career success. However, the new images of women did not revolutionise traditional ideas of femininity, which were still inextricably linked to masculinity. Nixon (2003) says that research into gender and popular culture has shown the unequal status of men and women in consumption. This primarily suggests that despite the position women have taken in society, the image of women in popular culture is still traditionally perceived in media such as music, film and television. These media still emphasise patriarchy and thus ignore the feelings and experiences of women. In addition to this, gender inequalities in consumption have also been studied concerning sexual orientation. The intersection of sexual orientation and consumption stems from a discussion of gender. Certain groups of people have experienced some discrimination in consumption, such as lesbians, bisexuals, gay men, and others. Milestone and Meyer (2012) state that people in these groups dress and consume differently from heterosexuals, mainly due to the media and literature that propagates traditional ideas about them. For example, in the last few decades, the gay community has been featured in many films and TV shows, such as *Modern Family* and *The Ballad of the Gays*. In general, gender inequalities in consumption have always existed, and a focus on gender enables us to understand consumer society better. Diversity of gender shapes consumer culture, but at the same time, consumption shapes gender.

## **3. Racial Inequalities in Consumption**

There is an important intersection between production and consumption, precisely regarding race. As with gender, another category in which inequality can be expressed in consumption is that of race. Generally speaking, the race is simply a distinction in terms of the colour of one's skin, used to distinguish between people living on a global scale. However, attitudes towards people of different races vary significantly in modern society, and Stillerman (2015) says that racial discrimination in consumer society is something to ponder. In the US and Europe, 'white' and 'middle-class' people have free access to all kinds of consumer places without arousing suspicion, so for these groups, consumption is a place where their needs and desires are met, but this is not the case for people of other races. This is not the case for other ethnic groups. For example, in an upmarket shopping mall, a black customer who bought an expensive belt was arrested by the police simply for paying in cash.

Although someone came forward to criticise this practice, the effect was minimal, and the customer paid a high deposit. Also, inequality exists in the cultural values of non-white cultures. Warikoo and Fuhr (2014) state that some believe that black students' families have a negative impact on them academically and can also reduce their interest in elite education. One manifestation of this is that they may not try to apply to elite universities such as Oxford and Cambridge. This largely explains the lack of adequate opportunities for black people to study in elite education. Cottle (1997) states that this phenomenon is also prevalent in the media and that reporting on racial issues is not reported accurately, even though some ethnic journalists still make an effort. There is still a certain amount of bias. In response to the everyday inequalities in consumption, some races, often discriminated against, have found alternative ways to develop groups with independent and autonomous styles. The boundaries between the subject and object of consumption began to blur for African Americans as they developed distinctive styles about themselves that became more popular and were even widely copied, the most obvious examples being fashion and music. Another way in which it has gained popularity is through clothing. Another way is clothing. Klein (2009) says that the development of African descent regarding clothing was mainly focused on the 20th century, with distinctive styles, mainly characterised by the wearing of sunglasses and baggy jeans, which were popular with many people. Thus, many African Americans use specific consumer habits and styles to express their racial identity.

At the same time, stigma is an even more critical issue characterising contemporary racial inequality. In the face of such inequalities, consumers of this group have adopted several strategies. Broderick et.al (2011) state that some black consumers often go to restaurants to avoid being stigmatised or perpetuated as 'overly cheap' consumers, so they wear formal suits. This is a measure of self-change. Another measure aims to change institutions to reduce the effects of stigmatisation. For example, ethnic groups suffering from obesity are less able to eliminate discriminatory perceptions of obesity, so they reform the industry by demanding changes from designers and traders. Thus, consumers use different strategies and approaches to self or institutional change regarding inequalities in consumption related to race.

#### **4. Class Inequality in Consumption**

Regarding the relationship between consumption and class, two arguments exist among societies: the freedom of choice due to the market, which leads to the individualisation of consumption. The other is that class differentiation leads to the differentiation of social structures. The conceptual debate on class has remained unresolved over the last century. There are two representative views of this debate: one is the social individuation theory of Giddens and Baker. One is Bourdieu's analysis of social class in terms of habitus and cultural capital. In contemporary cultural practices, a great deal of participation in cultural activities can gain corresponding social advantages, which stem from people with higher education, higher social status, etc.

Similarly, higher social classes are associated with words such as art galleries, opera houses, musicals and mansions. Nevertheless, those who lived at the bottom of the ladder and were busy making a living were never associated with these occasions. This section needs to clarify a concept, namely cultural omnivorous consumption. Higher social status is different for different levels of cultural offerings. Scholars have understood Bourdieu's cultural capital as a means of consuming inequality and social class. He affirms the class model of consumption, but on the other hand also adds 'cultural capital' as a critical element of 'taste', with consumers with high cultural capital seeking a distinctive 'taste'. In his theory, he still sees class status as the leading force shaping consumption, with different classes forming different habits, both due to class status shaping and as an expression of individual agency. It bridges the relationship between the individual and the social structure and, to a large extent, determines how individuals consume.

An example is a link between wealthy but not cultured consumers and those who are more cultured, i.e., tasteful but not so rich. Weingartner and Rossel (2019) say that the proportion of literate consumers in society has increased considerably over the past decades, while their consumption patterns have become increasingly omnivorous. Nevertheless, there is a strong correlation between omnivorousness and social inequality, so this does not mean that hierarchies are being dismantled. On the contrary, cultural omnivory can have clear boundaries, and Friedman (2014) suggests that different people have different tastes in entertainment on a reality shows. For some young people, comedy is a popular form of culture.

This new form of cultural omnivory that has emerged is a crucial aspect of reflecting the younger segments of society. Nevertheless, on the contrary, for some older people, comedy is a vulgar form of culture. However, some scholars have questioned this, and Savage (2013) suggests that omnivores are not a marker to distinguish between consumption and social inequality. Hanquinet and Savage (2015) say that the conclusions are repetitive and vague about the evolution of the theory in the articles supporting cultural omnivory and that some sociologists have been influenced by Bourdieu's theory, which focuses too much on inequality and the role of social class in the consumption of literary discourse, and therefore can lack some critical thinking. Therefore, in future research on cultural omnivorousness, attitudes, and emerging cultural capital need to be viewed

dialectically and, as far as possible, seek a solution to the inequalities in consumption due to social class in cultural consumption.

## 5. Conclusion

In general, inequality is crucial in consumption and is a crucial research target in the media and politics. In this paper, I examine how gender, race, and social class inequalities interact with consumption. These three aspects can be the focus of research on inequality, and focusing on only one of them does not address the specific problems of other inequalities. The first area of concern for the author is the inequality of gender in consumption. Traditionally, women are biologically weaker than men and are therefore primarily required to belong to the family, so women have to rely on their husbands for their consumption; therefore, their consumption goals are family-oriented. They rarely realise their consumption needs. Racial inequality is a deep-rooted phenomenon that is present in consumption, but the ethnic groups that are mistreated have developed a distinctive style in consumption, mainly in music and clothing. Although racial discrimination is one of the main inequalities in consumption, this group has developed their distinctive characteristics and form a popular culture has been present in modern society. Finally, the inequalities brought about by social stratification are also present in consumption, represented by Bourdieu's 'cultural omnivorousness', which argues that the legitimisation of culture through the combination of cultural capital, habitus and field is essentially a subordination to consumerism and media culture. Considering intersectionality, it can be used as an analytical tool to promote a deeper understanding of global inequalities, especially as it can put the two dimensions of race and class together, promoting an understanding of class and race and evidenced by the fact that when some academics talk about race, they are told that class must be included. Race should therefore be taken into account when formulating class inequalities. Intersectionality adds to the complexity of understanding social inequality and encourages a different perspective on social inequality. In addition to these factors, there are many other inequalities in consumption, such as age and physical condition, so in future research, scholars should look at inequalities in consumption in a more diverse way and be able to address these issues more objectively.

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