

# Above the throng: identity achieving in the consumer culture

[Business](#), [Marketing](#)



## Introduction: post-traditional society

For the liberal wing of modernity, pushed forward mankind and those who are high on consumption enter into post-traditional society, which contains more complicate social order. Meanwhile, the traditional culture is substituted by a new mass-produced culture, which is called ' Consumer culture'. With the emergence of consumer culture, people who are in the stable social order seek for individual autonomy, followed with deregulation of desire and economic prosperity without restriction of social values. People start to achieve superior social situation by purchasing symbolic products and imitated products of upper class. In fact, the consumers refer in particular to middle class, who

## **Middle class**

Both of the authors have mentioned middle class in a high frequency. The idea of American " middle class", constructed out of images, attitudes, acquisitions, and style, was emerging (Ewen, 1988). Historian Karen Halttunen defined middle class as people who occupied a static social position between the extremes of peasantry and aristocracy. (Ewen, 1988). Due to the overturn of the traditional culture followed by human's rapidly rising desire, the middle class has developed several significant characters. First of all, they spend excessive labor force and time whereas earn neither more nor less money, sometimes are worried about insufficient funds when the expenditure exceeds income. In fact , they suffer from live from hand to mouth. Secondly, in response to the situation, the middle class people are dissatisfied with their current lives and eager for aristocratic and luxury lives,

what's more, they want to be closed to upper class. Furthermore, they are sensitive and anxiety to be regarded as the poor, because it represents they have failure of lives. Therefore, they buy symbolic goods and products that imitate economic elites' style, in order to argue others' incorrect impression to them.

Due to the emergence of post-traditional society, people are more likely to judge one's status and identity by what they have rather than what they do. Therefore, symbolic products and superfluities are used for creating and strengthen personal status. In order to be thought rich and show their personhood, middle class has done a series of investment. They buy stylish clothes in order to show their distinctive personalities, and buy symbolic products to show their social status, although some of the products are replaced by imitated goods.

Slater and Ewen all think the middle class is external flashy whereas their inner world is flatulent, even though they try to masquerade the space. they lived suspended between current tough social status and the dream, which they took for their economic future (Halttunen, 1982) On the one hand, they dress stylish suits with smiling faces, speak good language with a proper "genteel" manner; on the other hand, it is continuous that they impose restriction on real feeling, and wear a mask of the noble identity, however they still feel anxious whether they are approved by the society.

## Slater

In Slater's view, the consumer culture brings about huge detriment in the post-traditional society. 'organic community', whose substituted notion is the traditional culture, has already died out and replaced by consumer culture. And people achieve personal status by the means of consuming, which the original fixed social order is taken place by a material world.

It is used to be a fixed and unchangeable society, and it is naturally that people are identified by fixed status when they were born, and they also own fixed 'blood and soil', birth and land. (Slater, 1997) It is legitimately to regulate a world, and people all follow the rule.

However, consumer culture overturns the primary way. As Slater said: 'Consumer culture is defined as an ersatz, artificial, mass-manufactured and pretty poor substitute for the world we have lost in the post-traditional society' (Slater, 1997) Consumerism focus on seeking for profits and economic growth rather than caring about people's life. In the consumer-oriented world, everything are attached a tag, that is, you can buy anything you want as long as you have money.

Slater think buying luxury goods is not just a fundamental activity in people's daily life, but also is malignant to destroy legitimate social order. People who buying luxury products by passion other than by reason. Some arguments point out that the power of money has already changed the whole cosmic order, which means people are able to buy status, positions and reputation if they have enough money.

Take Britain history as an example. In 1688-1756, British government started a “ financial evolution”, which changed a series of trade and economic regulations, and the regulations all tend to approve the power of money . The consequences is that the central charge is corruption, and money took charge of the authority. People can use money to fulfill their needs. For example, if a person who was used to be a farmer, and he wanted to be conferred orders. It should be impossible in the past because he had his fixed status when he was born, however, only if he own enough money, he can buy a title. In addition to, the peoples were no longer loyal to the monarch anymore. As can be seen from the example, the world became complex and disorder because of ‘ cash nexus’.

On the other hand, it is luxury goods that will bring about crime affairs and threaten to people ‘ s life.

In a word, Slater think culture should not counted by money., mediated or ruled because it was defined that way. (Slater, 1997)

## **Ewen**

In Stuart Ewen ‘ s book, all consuming images, he states some crucial arguments which have some similarities and differences with Slater’s views.

On the one hand, their similarities tend to point out the criticism that people achieve high status and personal distinction by undying consumption, although Ewen speaks in a soft tongue.

Firstly, he thinks that people distinguish them and others by consumptions, which is regarded as an epic crisis of identity. This view is strongly consistent with Slater's view. And the advanced right can be owned by anyone who desire it, because it says more about you than anything you can buy with it (Ewen, 1988). This kind of concept push people to get status and distinction rather than become an ordinary fellow within the mass.

Similarly Ewen takes the past records as an example. In the United States, by the 1830s, the entire people sake for becoming merchant middle class. As historian Edward Pessen said, these people " went to great pains to match the lavish living of the older upper classes of the eastern cities, succeeding to a large degree."(Edward Pessen, 1969). The conspicuous consumption of luxury goods can provide people desirable status. As a result, at that time, even the people who in the small village, all lived in villas which are fit up grandiose decorations and furniture. All of the unnecessary efforts were serve as showing their social status.

In response to people's dissatisfactions to current social status and identity, some cheap luxury goods were used for those who want to be distinctive but cannot afford expensive products. It was called kitsch. These goods are characterized as inexpensive, volume-produced substitutes of real luxury goods that are normal purchased by economic elites. These people were called white-collar employees, and be in a condition of " genteelpoverty". (Edward Pessen, 1969). They wanted to be close to economic elites' lives and then bought imitated goods.

However, there are some differences at the aspect of consequences to the mass-produced culture. Ewen thinks it would increase the gap between the poor and the rich. The evidences are shown in the Fourth Annual Report of Massachusetts Bureau of Labor in 1873, the wealth is distributed unfairly. To be exactly, more and more money goes into the merchant people, because they earn profit from the increasingly mechanized and consolidated means of production . At the same time, the energies, labor power and time of working class people are consumed in order to serve industrialism and factory capitalism. Therefore, poor people own even less money, compared with wealthy people become more and more rich. And Ewen also thinks it will work out untruthful dream that people enjoy their unreal identity.

### Conclusion

On the other hand, Slater thinks the consumer culture will bring out the disordered social order which should be identified by ' blood and soil', birth and land. And the prevailing wind of consumer culture will destroy the real culture which cannot be counted by money. And the proliferation of vanity psychology will produce motivation of crime, which will threaten citizen's daily life.