Lund University
Sociological Institution
Department of Social Anthropology

SANK01
Autumn: 2010
Supervisor: Steven Sampson

# Somewhere in the Crowd, There's You

## Defending Social Status via Competitive Consumption

Emma Usher

# Abstract

This paper is a theoretical investigation of how social actors strive to define and organize their existence via competitive forms of consumption. How is it that people construct (or are ascribed) certain identities and social positioning based upon their relations to objects? Objects appear generically and as mass produced collections of consumer goods. How then do we ascribe a difference of 'value' associated with certain items and how do these 'values' reflect different individual identities/statuses? Social status positions, relations and networks are now, more than ever, constructed through actors' relations to material objects. Due to the incredible pace of consumption, re-production and respective advances in technology, societies must constantly reform themselves to keep up with constant change. Status positions are threatened by a constant social competition and those who cannot 'keep up' are left behind (to lower status positions). Even the most mundane form of consumption, such as grocery shopping, now forms the basic foundations of social praxis in modern consumerist society. Analyses of previous anthropological and consumer research studies on object-human relations have provided facts and examples for comparison.

*Keywords:* Consumption, objects, social status, organization, competition

# Contents

# 1 Points of Reference

## 1.1 Questioning

*How is it that objects (ie. in supermarkets) allow proclamation of social status despite their generic organization?*

Material objects are themselves socially 'neutral' vessels that can form connections between different social relations and networks. Social actors however assign meanings to objects and once they have been 'appropriated', objects lose their original neutrality. Distinct status identifications that objects are assigned directly relate to how social actors organize 'place' and 'identity' within society. The thesis focusses upon the competitive nature of consumption and how objects *distinctly proclaim* social boundaries for behaviours and existence. The paper will use the supermarket environment to symbolically represent a smaller scale model of society where rendition, reception and response for creating social identities takes place.

## 1.2 Theory

Two theories proposed by Jean Baudrillard have structured the questioning of this paper. Firstly;

> “'the fundamental conceptual hypothesis for a sociological analysis of “consumption” is not use value, the relation to needs, but symbolic exchange value, the value of social prestation, of rivalry and, at the limit, of class discriminants.” (Baudrillard, 1981:30-1).

and second, that;

> "Consumption *is* an order of significations in a panapoly of objects … the manipulation of objects as signs; a communicative system (like a language); a system of exchange … a morality, that is a system of ideological values; a social function; a structural organization; a collective phenomenon; the production of differences..." (Baudrillard, 1998:15)

Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood's *The World Of Goods* provided invigorating insight, presenting the concept that "goods are neutral, their uses are social; they can be used as fences or bridges" providing a link between the first two theories(Douglas & Isherwood, 1996:12).

## 1.3 Method

The study is, as mentioned, a theoretical investigation of consumption. The results rely upon concentrated analysis of examples of previous litterature on the subject of consumption and of extracting data from empirical studies for comparable facts. No individual fieldwork or similar study was performed by the author. Previous consumer research papers on shopping path behaviours and anthropological studies have been used to provide background information and statistics. Consumer culture, consumption, material culture, shopping (and behavioural patterns linked to shopping), society and identification processes have been examined in the litterature and their concepts were compared to the line of questioning posed above. Most litterature focussed upon mall-shopping which has been applied to the model of the supermarket as much as possible.

Originally, Daniel Miller's book *A Theory of Shopping* was to provide specific data research to support the thesis' argument. However, due to the inability to attain a copy of the book, Miller's *The Comfort of Things* from 2008 has been used to provide anthropological insight into human-object relations. The book is a result of a seventeen month long period of study testing the assumption of the realms of "superficial" and the "materialistic" basis of life in today's society (Miller, 2008). It consists of thirty different portraits of people living along a street in South London. Various excerpts have been extracted from Miller's study to allow further explanation of concepts brought up in various points of the discussion.

# 2 A Theoretical ‘Backdrop’

*”Consumption is the meaningful use people make of the objects that are associated with them”*

This definition, taken from Bernard & Spencer, refers to both mental and/or material consumption and regards the social sphere of relations between objects, people and status-identification processes in societies. Humans use surrounding conditions, objects and other individuals to construct their own individual identity and place within their communities, as well as to organize the world that exists around them (Barnard and Spencer, 1998; Bauman, 2007:11; Marx, 1970:181). In this, the individual explores his or her place as a person in the world to ultimately find a purpose, or give meaning to their being[1].

Meaning and giving meaning to objects, people and different phenomena is an organizational tendency that allows for order and understanding in a person's life. Consumption physically exhibits the extent of how people accredit objects with social meanings. The individual reflects that which he/she observes (of society) and in turn is reflected by changes to the larger societal group's behaviours (Bauman, 2007:6; Bourdieu, 1984:11-13). However, as sparked off by the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism, social relations to objects have intensified over time as expressions of social class and identity (Baudrillard, 1998:172; Mackay, 1997:98).

In order to understand the background to consumption, consumer society and competitive social identification processes, this section will provide a brief history of the changes in social approach to consumption.

## 2.1 Progress

[1]See; Bauman,2007:57

Before the rise of the supermarket in 1916[2], household products and services were purchased either from the town square, (open air and closed-in) marketplaces or various specialty grocery and hardware stores (Underhill, 2004:31, 32).

The marketplace is a somewhat 'disorganized' environment, with it's produce and products varying by season and merchant. Time and spatial constraints would have 'forced' the customer into interacting with the other actors present (i.e. no way to avoid interaction with 'social strangers' or other actors in the tighter environment). In the case of the marketplace, outside threats of strangers, disorder, criminality and filth were reasons for concern and uncomfortability of shopping outings (Staeheli, 2009:977-8). The 'disorganization' of the marketplace does not satisfy desires for privacy or a sense of security and familiarity, whereas the enclosed space of a grocery store or supermarket does. As society evolved, open-air markets became indoor market halls which finally, in 1916, became the modern day supermarket.

The turn of the eighteenth century and industrialization of societies brought irreversible changes to social and economic lifestyles with rising living standards, increased wages and sudden abundance of consumer goods for mass distribution (Tyler May, 2001:180-1; Mackay, 1997:263). This wave of industrialization gave way for changes in social processes (I.e. occupations and social codes), and simultaneously gave birth to the modern day supermarket experience (Feinberg, 1991:426). With the ability to form wider relations to objects (due to increases in production rates), social actors began to explore the world of consumption and of improving their 'sociability' by associating themselves to wider object-people relations. As society changed, the systems of provision (i.e. marketplaces and grocery stores) were forced in turn to adapt to newer conditions to 'keep up' with the growing system.

## 2.2 'Discovering' the World of Objects

[2]Clarence Saunders founded the first American supermarket chain **Piggly Wiggly** in Memphis Tennessee, 1916. (Baudrillard, 1998:97, **98** & Underhill, 2004:142)

The introduction of the machine towards the end of the nineteenth century led to major changes in consumer behaviours. From sustenance, to 'excessive' consumption, Woodward also described the change as the ”materialization of distinction”, supporting Marx's argument in *Grundrisse*, that consumer society is merely a developmental result of higher production rates and thus of production (Marx, 1973:92, Woodward, 2007:113, Ortner, 2006:2,8-9; see also Bauman, 2007:85).

> “In a society of consumers no one can become a subject without first turning into a commodity, and no one can keep his or her subjectness secure without perpetually resuscitating, resurrecting and replenishing the capacities expected and required of a sellable commodity.” (Bauman, 2007:12)

Aided by machines, production and distribution of commodities *en masse*, allowed greater amounts of trade and wealth to be brought into societies. Economic focus shifted from wealth of the labourers (behind production), to the interest of profit from the consumption of such goods and services by individuals (away from production) (Bauman, 2000:76, Bauman, 2007:14; Marx, 1970:181-2). When objects became more readily available this caused an alteration to the system of material 'values' and their reflective social values (possession) (Clarke, 2003:5).

Hunter-gatherer, agriculturalist, productionist and now consumerist-based society. All appear as different stages in societal evolution, each a development of the previous stages' occupations (Clarke, 2003:13). “.. the heroes of production have been replaced by idols of consumption...” (Baudrillard, 1998:5).

## 2.3 Status Relations

Towards the end of the century, the possession of consumer goods more heavily represented and legitimated social status rankings. The ownership of desired[3] goods 'gave' individuals a clear-cut connection to a status ranking in the social hierarchy (Woodward, 2007:114-5,**126**). Woodward describes the consumer-society not as a revolutionary age but rather, as a “deepening and maturing” of previous communal interests in social status “ethics” regarding ownership of commodities. These ethics, combined with the mass production of objects and services, convenience of supermarkets (as providers of items), heightened “urban

[3]See Objects

sociality" and amplified cognitive relations (to material objects) have led to the development of modern day engrossment with consumption for purposes of social status-identification (Bauman, 2007:28,114; Marx, 1970:181-2; Woodward, 2007:113).

A revitalization occurred to the social relations to goods and services, as commodities became more readily available to the everyday person. Societies' previous productionist era and ethics laid the foundations for the rise of the consumer and consumerism in society, not only physically, but also psychologically (Baudrillard, 1998:74; Bauman, 2007:26). Social, and foremost individual, 'needs' changed from those of the primal human being (food, water, shelter, etc.) to the 'needs'[4] of being a 'better provider' or more socially successful individual than other actors in society. The consumption of goods quickly became a display by which people could physically boast and give proof of their personal wealth, the morality of the act concerning "… not *how* to consume; just *to consume*" (Clarke, 2003:17, 58; Bauman, 2007:48).

As society progressed and embraced the 'consumerist-way', the value of products and items utilities began to fade away (Bauman, 2007:8; Stebbins, 2010:471). "They are, simultaneously, *promoters of commodities* and the *commodities they promote*." (Bauman, 2007:6, 57, 114; Baudrillard, 2005:165). Consumption, as can be seen today, is no longer about the 'having' of items and their utilities. Instead, it is about how much and how fast utilities can be consumed and replaced by 'newer and better' versions. Simultaneously, consumption reveals how societies can reflectively 'renew' and constantly 'improve' themselves, to keep up with pace of ever changing material culture and conditions (Baudrillard, 1981:134-135n; Bauman, 2007:26, 31).

[4]Douglas, M. 1996(1979); Chapter 5

# 3 Supermarket Society

Using the supermarket as a basis of approach, this paper will discuss how human relations to objects lead to associations of status rankings in society. The supermarket has been chosen as the base for illustration of this paper's theory as the environment 'unites' social actors regardless of age, gender and no bias exists towards (or against) what kinds of social actors may generally enter the environment. In contrast, clothing retailers, specialty stores and even malls aim to attract specific social characters and exclude others (Staeheli, 2009:979-982,985-88; Stebbins, 2010:473; Underhill, 2004:144).

Consider the photo presented on the thesis' cover page. The picture shows how a supermarket can symbolically represent a model ’society’, where each specific item represents an individual actor within that society. Every single ’individual’ in the picture has a designated ’place’ that is organized according to the relations and assocations ’they’ have to the other actors. The individuals may therefore be organized into smaller categorical groups according to specific qualities they share in common, separating certain individuals from others. Despite this, all actors still exist in relation to one another (relations of comparison), forming the systematic organization and social basis for society. Without the presence of all of the actors and the relations they create, the structure of the society cannot persist (Douglas, 1966(2008):485). The importance of *identifying* and *defending* one's place in society proves vital for both the survival of individuals and of the society as a whole. This paper discusses how human beings use material objects as symbols to physically legitimate their society's existence and ultimately; their own.

Changing perspective, the picture also reveals how objects in supermarkets are presented in a highly generic form (i.e. side by side, regardless of production label). How then is it possible to associate certain items with specific social-status identities? To begin, a discussion of the changes to society and to people-object

relations aims to provide an understanding of the thesis' key concepts and provide a ‘backdrop’ for the study[i].

As described in the first chapter, the supermarket has been chosen as a point of reference and example due its likeness to that of the 'environment' of wider society. To discuss and give example of all of the points of consumption in wider society, a much broader thesis would have been devised allowing for a greater analysis. Without condensing the processes of consumption to the world of the supermarket, the discussion on relations, associations and networks would have to include more in-depth investigation. More complex, 'layers' and further continuations of the 'divide' than those this paper discusses (i.e between lower and higher status positions) would have widened to include specific social groups on local, state, national and international levels. To retain the focus of the thesis and still provide a decent basic 'environmental' example for explaining the aimed argumentation, the domain of analysis has therefore been isolated to the level of the individual and their relation to the supermarket.

## 3.1 Organization

The introduction of the supermarket in 1916 brought revolutionary changes to shopping methods and models. The covered and enclosed environment allowed control over the area and ensured a sense of community while at the same time a heightened safety and comfort of those inside the building (Staeheli, 2009:979,989). Threats of pickpockets and of the dirt collected when shopping in a market were eliminated by the walls of the supermarket which allowed in certain patrons while keeping other individuals out. Reducing 'risks', warranted the individual to feel a comfort within the walls of the supermarket, allowing them to express behaviours perform acts normally seen as 'private', within the public sphere (Miller, 1998:74,92,113). Shopping became a privatised activity contained in a 'sanitized' public domain and provided a familiar and comfortable environment, kindling the discourses of consumption (Mokhtarian, 2006:8; Staeheli, 2006:977, Underhill, 2004:3, 4, 34, 35).

Shelves, aisles and sections organize items into smaller groups (than that of the entire store) providing easier referencing for finding individual items within the domain. This comfort of order was further able to promote the positive reception of shoppers due to the consistency of the presence of products that existed on particular shelves in specific aisles. As increasing numbers of different supermarket chains evolved, a universal organization system arose which determined the placing of items within the different stores. Store layout varies in each supermarket due to sizing restrictions (or possibilities), however; collections (i.e. fruit and vegetables, dairy products and fridge items) exist in every store for reasons of customer convenience. The paths which customer's take through a store are mainly determined due to this organization (especially when advertising tricks, such as placing dairy products at the back of the store, force the customer to walk through the entire store to collect the item) however, shopping path behaviours ultimately decide how a store chooses it's layout (Whan Park, 1989:423).

In the ommitance of change, contradictions, ambivalence and disorder from the environment, successfully satisfies human 'needs' for symbolic order in their world and ensures the continuation of the systematic organization of the supermarket (Baudrillard, 2005:167,174; Kahn, 1993:257-259,268).

### 3.1.1 Environment – People and Interaction

The outside, or natural, world is a world riddled with dangers and risk, completely out of the control of humans. Yet, through technology and organization (symbolic and social), controlled and 'routinized' environments have been created where the individual may feel at 'ease' or free from the threat of 'outside dangers' (Bauman, 2007:29).

Originally designed to be a center for social activity, the shopping-'center' (alternatively, the supermarket) promised a 'worry-free' zone where crime, filth, and weather conditions were negated from the shopping 'experience' (Falk & Campbell, 1997:21, 99,144; Feinberg, 1991:426, Underhill, 2004:41). Shoppers were free to enjoy the leisures of exploring their relations to objects, away from the troubles 'uncontrollable' environments presented (Tyler May, 2001:180; Miller, 1998:75,112; Mokhtarian, 2009:12). Supermarkets became sites where social actors could attune to other actors behaviours and actions via public relations (Mackay, 1997:181; Mokhtarian,

2009:11). The environment provided an arena for inter-relationships where actors could be spectators and simultaneously, performers, analyzing all action and developing reactions accordingly (Bauman, 2007:11; Mackay, 1997:247). As an experience of community and membership, supermarket shopping not only allows for personal goals to be achieved through the interaction, but also for these goals to adapt and evolve to 'keep up' with those of other people (Bauman, 2007:112; Whan Park, 1989:422). Alternatively, the supermarket environment became a space where the individual's leisure or social time is *sold* to them (Baudrillard, 1998:153).

Paco Underhill's extensive research into the 'life' of malls and the 'shopping experience' provide great insight into the placement of shelves and the area supermarkets covered. Using Underhill's models of 'space', it is possible to analyze how individuals are able to spread themselves throughout the store, minimizing 'uncomfortable' random encounters with social strangers (Underhill, 2004:43). ”Shoppers make statements through space they occupy” and the domain of the supermarket allowed individuals to fill these 'spaces' with their own social communication or interactions (Jordan, 2003:34). “I enjoy shopping ... you don't have to care about others, you can have a look at things in peace … You feel it's your own time when you go shopping.” - Informant (Falk & Campbell: 150).

How shoppers react to store clerks gives indication to what kind of social environment exists within stores. This varies in different cultures and in the European examples, the reactions give evidence to just how much shoppers enjoy the privacy of shopping. Store clerks are fascinating characters within the shopping society. They exist to aid the shopper in finding items and simulteneously introduce new products to them. The attitudes towards store clerks in many European countries (on the part of the shopper) are that they should be somewhat neutral actors. They are expected to be friendly, but retain a personal emotional distance from the shopper and should wait for the customer to make first contact rather than ‘disturb’ the customer whilst they are browsing the store (Miller, 1998:121). So shopper's (in this example) show their appreciation of recognition by the clerks, however their ultimate desire is to peruse the store at their leisure, free from the ‘disturbances’ of other people. “You can see straight away ‘please leave me alone’. They will be polite, but especially British people – they are very ‘nice to meet you’ but that's it...” (Informant 'Dominic' to Miller, 2008:199)

In more recent times, shoppers focus more upon the 'savings' of shopping by bulk or from such retailers as Wal-Mart, Tesco's and other gross providers of household goods. Items are purchased here at lower prices than they are from smaller supermarkets or convenience stores. Associating prices to supermarkets and then to the shoppers who frequent the premises provides insight to the shopper's relation to economical standings and social opinions (see Mokhtarian, 2009: Abstract). Those who frequent the larger 'gross' merchant stores may include individuals from a lower-income household and family groups, where lower incomes constrict the 'spread' of money over household items, or higher total of family-members need to be provided for.

### 3.1.2 Objects and Presentation

Objects themselves are neutral vessels that humans fill with meanings and associated relations to gestures, etc. They are vehicles for expressing the capability of cultural expression and through, consumption; objects provide a discourse of the ongoing social interaction within wider society (Douglas & Isherwood, 1996[1979]:40-1).

Objects are bridges that connect disparate entities regardless of time and space. Elia[5] is a vibrant, passionate middle-aged woman with Mediterranean ancestry. An explosively colourful character makes her a captivating story teller and as she ”dances” her way through the narratives, the objects present in the room take upon the lives of the characters in the ongoing performance. Elia surrounds herself with objects, inherited mainly from close friends and deceased relatives, filling the house and her life with the a ‘lively’ presence of a variety of characters. Even in the clothes that she wears, Elia claims constant connection to her deceased mother and aunt. Relating to strong Greek ethos of ties between the living and the deceased, connections between individuals cannot be broken by death and Elia manifests this in her connection and relation to objects. She does not leave the house without at least one item that marks her mother's presence, whether it be in a handbag or scarf Elia may received from her (Miller, 2008:42). ”Such things bring the dead and the living into a state of immediacy with

[5]See Daniel Miller's *The Comfort of Things*, Portrait 3: A Porous Vessel (Miller, 2008: 32-45)

eachother" (ibid.). In a sense, Elia advertises to other actors her connection to these specific characters, and at the same time, satisfies her own personal needs of feeling the connection to these significant others. Through the telling of her stories, Elia re-awakens the presence of the deceased characters, simultaneously as giving their associated objects an active presence and 'life' of their own (ibid.).

This 'claiming' of associations to past and existing social relations, via material expression, forms the first half of the societal network construction process. Similarly as an interior designer, an individuals must construct their surrounds according to which items (and people) they believe 'go together' (Miller, 2008:176). By comparing the compatibility of *newer* things and people to 'familiar' relations and objects, an individual is able to sort out which ones 'fit' the realms of their order, and which don't. By using 'familiar' relations and objects as a foundation provides boundaries able to widen relations and social networks. The influences of new relations introduces and individual to unfamiliar ideas and situations, provoking them to widen their boundaries. Such can be said of the advertising of supermarket items and products.

The presentation of objects in supermarkets is riddled with advertising luring consumers into appropriating[6] and purchasing *new* products to widen their networks. They promote the exploration of newer, wider boundaries via 'playing on' familiar associations. Alluring advertisements showing either family friendly products which promise to 'bring the family closer', or those that show various recognized celebrities 'enjoying' *that* everyday home-brew coffee blend, play on the desires of shoppers. By association, the promise of these advertised items present aspirations of a life or a luxury that exists within grasp of those who wish to reach out for it.

Advertising presents an ongoing "discourse of objects" and plays a highly active role as a junction for associating people to a wider range of objects. Other than associating the everyday person with an item of celebrity status, the advertising of objects provides an extra assurance of the products 'safety'. 'I saw Jamie Oliver use this brand of cooking oil, maybe I should use it too'. Advertising associations provokes competition among consumers by identifying which individual actors are willing to familiarise and associate themselves to a more extensive collection of objects, and those who are not (Baudrillard, 2005:178,200).

[6]See Objects

Hui, Bradlow and Fader's study of purchase behaviour and behavioural hypothesis testing provides invigorating insight on the actual 'act' of shopping. The study focuses upon analyzing how shoppers are driven; by factors of time, the composition of the supermarket, by the interactions they have with the objects presented and the presence of other actors (Hui, 2009:478). Using consumer research methods of mapping of shopping 'paths' and decision processes, the study includes analyses of the different affects key factors have upon purchases made (Hui, 2009: 480-4, 486). Aside from this, the study includes a detailed table listing the products and categories in the supermarket, including a percentage indication of the purchase 'popularity' of various items. The top ten most commonly bought items included;

| | |
|---|---|
| Fruit (53.8%) | Cookies/Crackers (22.6%) |
| Vegetables (50.4%) | Milk (22.6%) |
| Butter/Cheese Cream (38%) | Ice Cream (19.6%) |
| Carbonated Beverages (24.2%) | Bread (19.4%) |
| Salty Snacks (23.2%) | Candy/Gum/Mints (17.3%)[7] |

Interestingly, the category Candy/Gum/Mints ranked more popular than breakfast cereals which only 17.1% of shoppers purchased during the study (ibid.). The results express a social communication. In analyzing these 'top ten purchases' (percentages) in a supermarket, it is possible to identify what objects social actors strive to associate themselves to.

In the original study, the table focusses on representing a connection between store layout and the popularity of customers frequenting the various zones of a large supermarket store (Hui, 2009:484). In this thesis study, it is instead the percentages of purchase that is of importance. It can be assumed that shoppers who frequent larger supermarket environments, do this due to the need to purchase a larger quantity of items at reasonable prices[8]. This is in comparison to last minute shopping trips to smaller convenience stores where, without a planned purpose, the trip can result in higher amounts of 'uneccessary' purchases of candies, gum or sale items. A larger supermarket requires time and planning (i.e a

[7]Hui, 2009:486

[8]Larger retail providers can afford to sell items at lower prices than smaller stores due to the bulk ordering of stock

shopping list) where the shopper carefully selects their items in order to achieve the goals of the list. This is the reason why this study has been chosen, the data provides a clear, somewhat unbiased view of purchase behaviours.

Where one might imagine that 'everyday items' such as cereals, milk, fruits and vegetables and meat should all be included within the top ten purchased items in a larger scaled supermarket, it is possible to see that this is not the case from the results. More importantly, it is blatantly obvious to see which items have not been ascribed with desirable meanings, such as Natural/ Organic Drinks (0.4%) and Natural/Organic Others (0%). These results identify a society's relation to various goods and the general boundaries of relations the society supports. Candy/snacks and carbonated drinks have received higher amounts of public recognition than their Natural/Organic counterparts. This could be due to the fact that natural and organic products are a *newer* range of products that have become available in the supermarket (mainly) within the last decade. Natural and organic products are often more expensive than their counterparts. If an individual is not familiar with the product, or of it's reputation, and it is a product which costs that little bit extra, it is unlikely that the product will sell directly. More prominent familiarity and comfort in other products (including prices) has overshadowed a reason for the majority of consumers to fully explore the realms of this new organic-food section. For example, the appearance of a packet of soy crisps in an aisle is not enough to lure people from buying a packet of brand label potato crisps they ‘trust’ by previous experience and reputation of friends and family.

Obviously natural and organic products have received enough of a response from consumers to allow their continued restocking and production, however, their association into everyday shopping lists is not yet principal. This is due to fact that these 'newer' products have not yet created enough relations to wider society and have probably not had a strong enough basis for comparison (i.e. previous successful products) for people to associate them to. The 'popularity' of objects depends highly upon both the reputations of similar 'previous' products and on how well the new product can form relations to both people and other objects in the store.

The following paragraph continues this discussion, addressing the needs and the importance of expression to legitimate a product/ person's place in society.

### 3.1.3 Community

Consumption is a 'behaviour' by which humans express desires to be 'recognized' as an individual (in society). It is also an expression itself of the social "instability of desires and instability of needs..." that spiral individuals and societies into consumption and consumer behaviours (Bauman, 2007:31). No person can possibly 'own it all', there always exists someone who owns something *more,* or something *else*. The supermarket's basic functional use is in satisfying shopper's provisional *needs*. However, with the addition of advertising, the supermarket also creates and promotes *desires* (as discussed in Chapter 3.3). This provides an environment where individuals can formulate and test their social goals (how they wish to be/act) in interactions with other actors. An individual who picks out the organic foods and products from the supermarket shelves makes the statement of their opinions on other actors and of the wider society. They may simply be stating their concern for the natural environment, or they could simply reveal a specific taste for organic produce. Either way, their purchases says something about who they are and what *kind* of society they desire.

Portrait thirteen in Miller's book presents Marina, a character driven by previous experiences to 'better provide' for her children than her own parents could with her. In observing how she herself was raised and how other families functioned, Marina formed a tendency to connect with her children via McDonald's Happy Meal toys and to help the children form their views of the world around them via play. Collecting the toys became a tradition where both children and parent would play together and Marina's deep connection to the toys reveals this. For her, the identification of being a parent and provider rested heavily upon how she desired to foster her children's imagination and uphold their close connection to a parent. In a sense, "McDonald's Happy Meals became an aesthetic totalisation of her existence" (Miller, 2008:132). Although this does not directly relate to supermarket shopping, one could apply this view onto the family who shop as a group. They explore the world of objects together, with the children attaining familiarity to products by observing the associations and decisions their parents make.

Social actors are nutured into the world of objects; ('my mother used to buy these', or 'we always had these (items) at home') and by nature are inquisitive to

explore the environment further. The supermarket domain accommodates individuals with a platform for synchronous observation and comparison of themselves to other actors. The objects that individuals pick out and 'collect'[9] form relations to other objects and people in the supermarket; these relations serve the actors in attaining various social goals. Within the supermarket individuals not only shop, they consume, compare, compete, analyse, reject, aspire, deny and communicate their inner most desires and boast their associations to the world (Woodward, 2007:102-3).

## 3.2 Choices and Collecting

All items appear side-by-side (above and below each other) in supermarket shelves, regardless of their value or 'reputation'. How then do we ascribe a difference of 'value' associated with certain items? An 'item-category' (i.e. tinned soups, breakfast cereals) receives a certain amount of shelves, or a portion of an aisle, and all different products that fit into that category must exist within this area. Items are most commonly not arranged in an order such as, from the cheapest 'labels' up to the most expensive. The tins are simply placed side by side. The only organization that may occur is that the various items produced by one label exist in close vicinity or that sale items are placed at eye-level (sales and advertising 'tricks').

The apparent 'un-biased' nature of the public presentation of consumer goods conveys an underlying discourse of choice. Product selection by the consumer who creates individual collections of and relations to objects, laden with differed personal meanings, than those of other actors (Jordan, 2003:35). These collections represent the individual in material form, thus making a statement that separates them from the generic organization of people in society. Adapting Darwin's 'survival of the fittest' to emphasize this discussion, it is possible to say that in consumer society, those who can 'consume' *more* prove themselves to be the 'fitter' members of society. They have a better access to the economy and therefore a higher level of control over their living. Individuals who cannot create such an

[9] See The Collection

abundance of relations via consumption prove their lesser 'inability' and are assigned to the 'lower' social rankings of society. These individuals are not 'removed' from the system (as weaker species were through extinction). Their presence exists for purposes of comparison and organization; if lower status positions exist, then higher status positions must exist to compare them to (and vice versa)[10].

Those who can associate themselves to a wider range of collections 'legitimate' a higher status position in consumer society. An individual's desire to improve their social standing, via the exhibition of the number of objects they can consume, is the driving force behind consumption (Bauman, 2007:16,114).

> "The task of the consumers therefore … is the task of lifting themselves out of that grey and flat invisibility and insubstantiality, making themselves stand out from the mass of indistinguishable objects... (Bauman, 2007:12)

Objects are presented to us in as in the picture on the front page to this paper; in mass proportions. They exist, pre-organized in relation to a widely generic system of provided goods (for example, as in the supermarket), that is much larger than the individual can comprehend. This allows for freedom of choice, individual shoppers may pick out those items they have (or are to create) relations to and reorganize these into smaller collections of their own. It is in analyzing the creation of these collections that we are able to construct the definitions of an 'individual' (Baudrillard, 2005:151; Falk & Campbell, 1997:74,87). An actor's own aesthetic choices and formation of (object) collections play an active part in larger societal processes. These expressions help to define what kind of society the individual belongs to and how they belong to it (Baudrillard, 2005.92; Whan Park, 1989:425; Woodward, 2007:6, 17-18).

[10]Consider Claude Lévi-Strauss' theory of *binary opposition*.

# 4 The Resulting Consumer Society

Consumption begins with 'appropriation', a relation created by humans which establishes a psychological identification with objects (Barnard & Spencer, 1998; Clarke, 2003:45; Stebbins, 2010:468)[11].

Humans regard objects as 'social markers' or 'signifiers' of social categories such as gender, status, ethnic identity, et cetera. Objects are therefore able to 'act' upon people (that is to say, objects can affect human behaviours as well as structures of social organization) and as a result, exist as active participants within wider social networks. The relations that are created between objects and people establish order, control, as well as a system of socially reflective meanings that 'make sense' of the world (Agar, 1985:24; Ortner, 2006:111-4; Woodward, 2007:13-16). The 'meanings' of objects lead to desires and goals giving both individuals and societies' a promise of a future as well as an accumulation of forms of knowledge[12] over time (Agar, 1985:23, 34).

Individual meanings given to objects reflect on social interactions; how (other) actors receive and react upon aspects of personal identity (how individuals wish to present themselves to and be acknowledged by, wider society) and interactions of larger social groups on local and international arenas (Mackay, 1997:117). Individuals seek 'positive affect' (positive recognition) in acquiring meaning to their lives (Goldschmidt, 1960:90) and as the association of objects to humans attempts to materialize an expression of 'being' or one's existence (Goldschmidt, 1960:74-81; Woodward, 2007:10 ,84, 135, 153).

## 4.1 Mechanisms of Systematic Organization

[11]Information under definition given for term 'consumption'.
[12]Used here to describe the relations between, and association of: meanings, goals, actions, acts/ acting and inferences (Agar,1985:34-5)

Animals – unlike humans – are born into the world complete with a basic natural 'programming' which enforces them to live their lives in a preset order. For example, bees are already programmed to build their hives in a particular way; there is no divine entity or text that instructs bees on how, when or where best to build their hives or to live out their existence (Bauman, 2008:54; Goldschmidt, 1960:17,18).

It is because of this lack of 'in-built programming' that humans create symbolic meanings, purposes and goals, and legitimate their own associations with these via material forms to justify existence. When humans look upon themselves through documentary films and put themselves under their microscopes, it is easy to notice the similarity in the somewhat insignificance of (individual) human life to that of bees[ii]; a life devoid of meaning is seen as lacking purpose. Moreover, the fragility and briefness of life make it imperative for meaning and values to be constantly enforced within the realms of social existence (Appadurai, 1986:4-5; Ortner, 2006:114-119,129). Material objects transpose particular 'meanings'. The ownership of objects transmits the associated meanings from the objects onto the individual, also known as the relation of the "signifier" and "signified" (Baudrillard, 1998:**192**; 2005:176).

Objects, thuse defined as being vessels for carrying human passions[13], are the material forms by which we can analyse how both individuals and societies regard and self-criticize their existence (Baudrillard, 2005:91; Ortner, 2006:129).

'Meanings' associated to everyday objects therefore differ in each society (Baudrillard, 1998:193). Varying perspectives are applied, yielding different outcomes and resolutions of the purpose and place of the objects (Agar, 1985:23).

Classification of objects by their size and utility is regarded as being less important than of the social gestures that are associated with them (Baudrillard, 2005:1). Does a diamond infer wealth, hard earned wages, or that 'real' love people see in movies? Does a desk connote businessman, or student? The meaning, passions and gestures that objects convey are what provoke and promote social intercourse; it is the 'meanings' of objects that humans consume and are themselves consumed by (Bauman, 2008:9; Baudrillard, 1998:7,191; Mackay, 1997:8).

[13]As defined in Littrés dictionary

The value of a 'meaning' taken from an individual object can increase when it is associated with other objects even more so when they exist as part of a collection or as a sum of collections. The more values an individual can associate themselves with, the greater their 'personal value' which in consumer society is translated into 'social status' (Baudrillard, 1998:152, Woodward, 2007:174). Associated meanings and values of objects change over time. Although meanings and values may change over time, objects cannot exist without these vital attributes and they assume different social meanings constantly. Changes in value and meaning are both direct results of (and catalysts for) changes in technology, social territories and the identification of enemies and strangers to a nation (Goldschmidt, 1960:74-81). In identification, appropriation and association processes, social actors construct systems of order which construct the frameworks for social organization.

Objects, as humans, cannot exist as single entities. They must exist instead, as components of an interrelated *system of objects* and it is through their *comparison* to other objects that they receive social value and meaning or meaning**s** (Baudrillard, 1998:47; 2005:150, 204). This system is translated into social terms as an 'organizing principle' providing social actors with order, from the natural disorder that exists in the world (Baudrillard, 1998:60, 81, 131, 170; Mackay, 1997:4). They are subsequently, both entities that can be associated to other entities as well as the 'links' that connect, or associate, entities (Agar, 1985:34). Objects bring social beings into contact with one another through their 'existence' and, most importantly, by their *absence*. The lack of particular objects, as shown by expenditure of material items as well as in "functional uselessness", lays the basis for comparison of symbolic values of objects (Baudrillard, 1998:112-114; Clarke, 2003:45). One desires most, that which they cannot have.

The constant striving and desire for symbolic meanings for social recognition is the driving force behind consumerist behaviours. Symbols and symbolic systematization are the basic units of sociality, determining the boundaries of human behaviour and social norms (Goldschmidt, 1960:20-1). Another realm of consumption exists in the wasteful and excessive 'devouring' of objects and meanings (Bauman, 2007:21; Baudrillard, 1998:5, 43). Going 'through' as many objects possible allows individuals to feel as though they increase their grasp upon the

material and thus, control over, the natural world. This 'successfully' associates individuals with wider social networks, increasing comparability and assigning him/her a social-status 'identity'[14]; (Goldschmidt, 1960:90, 164-8; Mokhtarian, 2009:12).

Interaction with objects signifies the mortality of man and how through the destruction of objects, men attempt to remove the imminence of death from life; the ”fetishistic logic … [that is the] ideology of consumption” (Baudrillard, 1998:47, 59). Man lives on in his possessions which are passed down through the generations (or on to other individuals). In trying to remove disorder and death, the world becomes organized and under human control allowing societies to feel as though they have secured their *present* and *future*. When order has been brought to the natural world all that remains is the organization and control of people. It is in the assignment of meanings that all human and non-human entities are given a place in the world and more specifically, a social-status ranking (Woodward, 2007:57).

Material objects play a central role in everyday life providing social actors with ”a *process of signification and communication* … [or] a *process of classification and social differentiation*...” (Baudrillard, 1998:60). This forms the basis for their social existence and provides a means for interacting with one another. How social actors interact is determined by their relation to the objects that surround them. Although the abundance objects seems to allow room for all individuals to have equal access to social networks, relations in consumer society are driven by rivalry and competition as the next section will discuss.

## 4.2 Social Actors

> *“a sociological analysis of 'consumption' is* not *use value, the relation to needs, but* symbolic exchange *value, the value of social prestation, of rivalry and, at the limit, of class discrimination.”* - JeanBaudrillard (1981:30-1. original emphasis)

Significant meanings differentiate objects and are connected to a value system whereby material items are ranked either by their utility or their 'social

[14] See chapter 3.2 The Place of People

desirability'. Due to appropriation processes, *value* given to objects acts as signifiers of various social status rankings and aids in 'organizing' actors into a 'society' (Goldschmidt, 1960:164-7; Woodward, 2007:69, 75). Via appropriation processes, objects have been ascribed meanings which individuals then 'acquire' by collecting respective objects. In this, the desires of how individuals wish to be seen and recognized by society are identified by analysing which reflective values, meanings and social gestures their material possessions connote (Baudrillard, 1998:ix, 8, 165; 2005:213, Bauman, 2007:57, 62; Miller, 2008:1). In a sense, the actor consumes him or herself, as he/she is immanent in the values and meanings of the material objects they have collected; ”we become what we buy” (Baudrillard, 1998:95, 129, 135, 192; Mackay, 1997:5). The French word '*personne*', translated into English as 'no one', presents an invigorating concept initiating discussion of the formation and identification of 'individual's' within gregarious organization (Baudrillard, 1998:193).

### 4.2.1 Identification

Even though the organization of hierarchical systems may vary somewhat in different societies there always exists a basic divide between higher and lower status positions. To keep this paper simple and clear in its argumentation the divide of 'status-positions' will be kept to the terms of 'lower' and 'higher'. Actors defined here of 'higher' status will refer to those who possess power and control over a great number of other actors in society, whether this is via political or economic means, including higher income households[15]. Countering this, lower social status positioning concerns social actors who possess less political or economic power in their society (unemployed or working class) who earn a weekly income of up to USD$1000[iii]. The focus of this paper is to discuss the competition and comparison that create a relational hierarchical ranking system dividing people into social-status categories (or positions). This ongoing comparative discourse is directly related to consumption.

[15]Weekly income of over USD$1,200 or more (http://adl.brs.gov.au/mapserv/fishcoast/glossary.html) [5/1/2011]

The sociological term 'identity' that will be used in this paper refers to the socializing mechanism of actors that define and organize social beings pertaining specific categorical groupings within gregarious cultural climates[16].

Organizing a social hierarchy requires basic categorical definitions for classifying actors. On wider social levels, organizational categories identify the 'place' of different social groups as well as that of the individual's place within the various dividing social groups. Identification categories include such features as gender, sexual preferencing, ethnicity, religious beliefs and status rankings in the social hierarchy with anomalies existing at all levels (Woodward, 2007:134-5). Groups and consequent anomalies interact to form the boundaries, morals, norms and values on the different levels of the collective, groups and of the individual. Identification begins on the level of the individual as a sense of knowing one's 'place' within society vis-à-vis other actors. This provides a sense of stability and comfort in knowing that the person secures and defines his or her 'place'; no other person in society can fill *his or her* position. What you *have* and what you *offer* make the individual stand out from a group (Bauman, 2007:12). By expressing your desire for this 'positive affect' through the consumption of material items, individuals legitimate (their) defined place in society (Bauman, 2007:110; Falk & Campbell, 1997: 28; Goldschmidt, 1960:169).

### 4.2.2 I Shop, Therefore, I Am...

Constant striving for higher positioning and the constant desire for *better* spiral individuals into the cycle that is consumption (Bauman, 2008:12, 30; Strathern, 1992:38). That is to say, the moment an object is purchased and consumed, a newer model or 'better' edition appears. Individuals must purchase the newer versions, to secure their participation in consumer society and retain their higher 'association' to the system. Those who cannot 'keep up' by constantly consuming the newer versions (I.e. inability to associate themselves), have fewer relations to consumer goods and lose their 'control' over the system (Bauman, 2007:132-3).

Baudrillard states that lower classes aim for functionality rather than luxury" (Baudrillard, 2005:87) and while the statement presented may be true, it may however provide some injustice towards those he speaks of. The functionality and

[16]Erikson, E.H. 1980 (1959). *Identity and the Life Cycle*. New York: W.W Norton

practicality of objects would be a logical (economical) principle by which lower classes choose the products they associate to (Ortner, 2006:24). However, this does not mean that the lower classes may actually *aim* for functionality, rather than they may instead be *forced* to choose functionality due to economic constraints. Some may always exist on 'lower' status levels as a result of ignoring functionality and allowing illogical principles of desire to steer their consumption of goods well over budget. A desire to be able to consume as higher classes exists mainly in the lower classes ('desire what we cannot have') as there exist a higher level of relations they do not have access to. The discourse of status can always be tied back to a discourse of, money; however, this analysis does not aim to investigate the ongoing economical exchange within consumer society[17].

Technologies and objects have at some levels, 'replaced' and 'depersonalized' social interaction (Baudrillard, 2005:204). An individual will therefore constantly seek out the recognition (or positive affect) of other actors in society, as well as the ability to exhibit this desire for recognition, via **material forms** (Baudrillard, 1998:171; Mackay, 1997:139). Retracing back to previous discussion of human-object relations, the apparent 'lack' of natural programming in humans has led to the construction of a symbolic system. This system organizes all entities (living/inanimate and human/non-human) via their relations to one another[18]. Individuals assign social meanings and gestures to objects. When they consume an object, they assume the associated meanings and gestures, resulting in the commoditization of the 'self'. This 'self' can then be exported and reproduced just as any product can, adapting to new situations and spreading itself out through networks of relationships. Whichever object or subject can spread itself out to the most farthest reaches of societal and international networks is seen as more 'fluid' and compatible; a feature highly desired in consumer society and seen as highly successful.

The ability for the interchange of objects and subjects in consumer society makes their 'exporting' a risky task. If, for example, network A changes its relation to a specific object, subject or collection, all other relations must change to secure their ongoing 'membership' to a 'renewed network A' or similar model. It is a highly competitive system and those who cannot adapt to change are cut off from

[17]This could be analysed in further studies regarding consumption.
[18]Lévi-Strauss, C. 1963(1967)

the network, or 'left behind'. Those 'left behind' lose their social status ranking and are placed on a lower rung in the hierarchy. The individual object/subject must then bring itself back up the ladder (hierarchy) by adapting and 'improving' it's "liquidity" to become more socially recognized (Baudrillard, 1998:192; Bauman, 2007:52-3, 57, 114). As material objects are constantly updated and remodelled, the individual will never find him or herself 'ahead' of the technology (the highest social standing, by which one has 'control' over most technologies), however the image of one day attaining that position of control and the constant movement of society around them pushes the drive of the individual onward (Mackay, 1997:120). As technologies are refashioned and updated, so too must the individual if he wants to secure his ongoing participation in the consumer society (Bauman, 2007:12, 28, 56).

In spite of this amount of change and pace of life, individuals still aspire to 'higher' status positions which provide greater amounts of luxury to living than the one they may currently experience. Desire for 'that' lifestyle forms goals and actions are carried out to achieve them. Primal 'needs' of food and shelter become 'needs' ridden by desire for 'better' and 'more'; the basics become just that, basic. Why have 'basic' when you can have *better*? 'People' exist as a generic collective (a society); a person however, is more defined (Baudrillard, 2001:52; 1998:87; Goldschmidt, 1960:81, 82). The identity of actors, when considered individually, must make a stance on whom they *are*. Consuming objects to define (and defend) one's identity redefines and reorganizes surrounding environmental factors to fit the views of the individual (Bauman, 2007:110,114). This redefining and reorganizing endures in the constant communication between the various actors within societies, introducing the next chapter of discussion on the 'society' of consumption.

## 4.3 Communication

As a social phenomenon, consumption exists *in* communication; in the mixing and 'meeting' of different views upon the world. It is therefore not a relation of making means and ends, but rather a competitive relation between social beings that goads the consumption of material objects (Douglas & Isherwood, 1996:6; Baudrillard, 1998:8).

Communication, as mentioned above, does not strictly refer to a verbal kind of communication. In fact, it refers much more to the non-verbal dialogue that plays out in ever enduring *cycles* of actions, consequensive reactions and reorganized ('new') action. A subject or object cannot exist on its own. Even through non-communication, or the inability to keep up with the pace of consumer society, social actors (both objects and people) exist 'in dialogue' with the system. Consumption provides a concrete physical form by which analysts of social behaviours can identify this ongoing dialogue to figure out why it exists.

## 4.4 Action and Reaction

Objects and their reflective social meanings provide use for differentiating people when greater numbers of actors are able to actively involve themselves in the process. Allowing a wider range of people to take part heightens the competition, raising the values of relationships as well as elite goods (Goldschmidt, 1960:158-9). Competition and involvement in the processes of consumption form an interdependency of social actors; individual members cannot exist as a part of the system without the active participation of others (Strathern, 1992:22).

Certain characteristics secure the longevity of a society. Walter Goldschmidt's *Understanding Human Society* presents eleven 'social imperatives' that allow a society to persist over time. The imperatives discuss social existence beginning with the active participation of the individual. Man's commitment to social life involves him in necessary networks of social relationships, also known as the 'social organization'. All social networks help to define an individual's place within the larger societal system and are vital to the survival of the group that all individuals know *their place*. Children “grow” into social systems. They constantly learn to identify socially acceptable behaviours (standard ways of acting) and how to reflectively (re)act upon their existence within the 'group'. The presence of 'networked' interrelationships and groups ultimately produces regulations for the self-maintenance of order. Goldschmidt describes this as involving the individual subordinating his or her own personal desires for the 'greater good' of the group (Goldschmidt, 1960:61-4).

The social imperatives are themselves a form of symbolic organization. They are not to be considered as omnipresent written laws but instead, as definitions for the boundaries of existence, providing a *promise* of order in the world. If a societal group cannot hold themselves to these social imperatives, they threaten the existence of their organization (Goldschmidt, 1960:61-4, 101, 145).

Consumption satisfies requirements for upholding the social imperatives in groups. Individuals are assigned a place within the society from birth (or creation in the sense of objects) which is used to allow the actor to diligently progress and evolve as a social being. In playing an active role in consumer society, individuals create wider and 'tighter' networks of relations due to the constant competitive interaction. The consumer society and systematic organizational systems that arise from 'intercommunication' with objects provide values and forms for regulating social behaviours. These relations provide not only order for standard forms of behaviour, they also rid society of ambivalence and contradictory phenomenon. In the society of consumers, the attempt to eliminate anomalies (contradictions to the norm) can be observed by analzysng the properties and value of objects that are classified as 'highly desirable' (or elite goods) (Mackay, 1997:25-6). The social meanings that highly desirable goods reflect provide an understanding of the aspirations a society has of itself (I.e. what kind of society 'it' aims to be) (Baudrillard, 1998:74; Mackay, 1997:35).

Technological developments and material production implicate all elements of social culture. The active participation and association of these objects in societal networks define the boundaries of social existence articulating the morals, values, relations and actions people *should have*.

These social imperatives, which can also be described as the structures of an ideology (the “rationale [of the society] imposed upon known universe...”), provide a 'programming' to life which societies may refer to in times of social confusion (Goldschmidt, 1960:100). Upholding the organization via the social imperatives retains the status quo securing a promise of a society's future. Man cannot exist ’alone’, he depends on vital interaction with other social beings for his existence. Human beings prosper from competitive self-comparison and reflection which acts as an impetus for social evolution and survival.

## 4.5 Life and Death in Consumption

Consumption is based upon a competitive process of creating relations to and associating with as many possible social networks as possible. If consumption was not concerned with or driven by social competition how else could the system survive?

By analysing how consumption affects social behaviours and then reversing this idea (i.e. how social behaviours affect consumption), it is possible to identify a second 'driving-force' behind consumption.

Consumption and creating relations to objects organizes social worlds. So, alternatively, consumption and creation of relations allows social individuals to feel as though the world exists in an 'orderly fashion'. In assigning meaning to objects and to themselves, individuals provide an order for the existence of 'things'. The creation of an entity, the controlling of its 'life' and its ultimate destruction via consumption conjures up the idea that humans have control over their surrounds; nothing exists without having a purpose and 'everything is relative' (Baudrillard, 2001:14-5, 19; Clarke, 2003:46).

When an individual is born they are instantly associated within the basic social network of the family group from which they build their future relations. When a product is created, it too is instantly associated ínto a 'family-type' group consisting of predecessing models and versions, as well as other products produced by the same company. Its birth ultimately leads to the creation of more objects. This can be by the same company who must receive the social response to their product and then respond by creating a new need for society to want when they have consumed the previous object. Competing companies may respond to the product by countering the production with their own creations which threaten the existence of the first company's product. Think of supermarket aisles filled with numerous production labels, all offering more or less the same version of one product. An item's shelf life is determined by how shoppers respond to its existence. If the item is positively recognized, its survival is secured, if not, it is removed from the system. Competition for shelf space is high, replacements can be found instantly so an item must defend their place to survive. Products and

product labels come and go over time or change in their promise this is all determined by how 'they' present themselves and what kinds of relations they form. If a person or objects secures wider networks of relations, they may have other associations to draw upon to help them adapt to changes if one relation or network suddenly fails. If products and people can adapt themselves to constantly changing situations and still be recognized by society, they may successfully secure their present and most importantly, their future.

This further proves that social actors (both objects and humans) ”are never isolated from actions, effects or the presence of others” (Strathern, 1992:23). The ease of interchanging objects and subjects in consumer society allows for constant reproduction, competition and inevitable destruction; a never ending search for bigger, better, 'fitter'.

Death plays a huge part in the creation and assuring the continuance both of the processes of consumption and of consumer society (Baudrillard, 1998:99). Consumption gives (social) life and purpose to objects and actors giving them a place and identity in the social system. It also brings the subject of death (usually a subject of taboo) into the social foreground (Baudrillard, 2001:10, 102).

The actual *act* of consumption provides social actors with the opportunity to explore their existence, identity and the threat of their eventual death. By exploring the They do this by exploring the presence and absence of objects in their lives. More specifically, they ”rehearse” their death via the collections that they create in how these collections are controlled. An incomplete collection allows for further exploration and for the creation of wider relations. Completing collections consummates the goal that once provoked the individual to interact with the objects. Without a purpose or goal, the collection no longer provides the individual with a means to extend their network relations (Ortner, 2006:9). Unless the collection can receive a new purpose, an individual must move on and find a new goal to ensure their ongoing recognition of existence by wider society (Baudrillard, 2001:10; 2005:102). If the individual cannot adapt to newer goals they risk their membership in consumer society, the extreme pace of consumption cannot wait for those who cannot keep up (Strathern, 1992:15). The individual is thus under constant pressure to compete for their right to existence within consumer society. They can be replaced in a moment as soon as they no longer can legitimate their

'place' (Baudrillard, 1998:33-4; Clarke, 2003:46; Mackay, 1997:49, 97; Miller, 2008:2; Woodward, 2007:64).

> "What man gets from objects is not a guarantee of life after death but *the possibility ... of continually experiencing the unfolding of his existence in a controlled, cyclical mode, symbolically transcending a real existence the irreversibility of whose progression he is powerless to affect.*" (Baudrillard, 2005:104)

# 5 Conclusions

In the discussion of the social world of objects and humans we have identified key points and forms concerning organization and identification. The original riddle states; how is it that objects (i.e. in supermarkets) allow proclamation of social status despite the genericism of their organization?

In order to answer this, the concluding discussion will be divided into two parts. The first section will summarize what has been discussed of the social relations, meaning, associations and collections that exist between people and objects. This will be followed by a section discussing the investigation of the social competition and identification processes taking place within society.

## 5.1 Associations, Collections & Identifying Relations

In combining the data presented earlier, we can constitute that through the collecting of particular objects, social actors create and organize their identity or social status vis-à-vis others and the surrounding environment. As a collective, both humans and material objects fade 'into the crowd'. The apparent generic presentation of mass produced objects has been questioned. The analysis has revealed that supermarket collections may be monotonous and without bias. However, once people start to reorganize these collections into their own categories and smaller collections, they charge the associated objects with meanings and passions.

In picking out individuals from the mass, a dialogue is created expressing the relation of the two entities. By identifying associations, relations and collections (of objects) it is possible to identify three features;

1) how the collection relates to the larger group/entity

2) the limitations and boundaries of what is seen as acceptable and unacceptable within the collection

3) what 'personal' traits the collection embodies

It is therefore social actors and the relations they create that remove the apparent neutrality of objects turning them into active social members within the society. Objects are therefore highly influential subjects. Objects may be 'empty' vessels when they are seen out of context; however, objects always exist in a context in the social world. If not, they are either considered 'useless' and destroyed, or they are remodelled to fit the change in situation and to create new collections.

It is the collections that individuals form which mark their identity. In the supermarket, the mass of items appear devoid of 'personal' traits due to their positioning within the shelves and yet each item has specific relations to any number of other items in the store. Once an individual reorganizes them in a way that seems befitting to the way they believe the objects should be grouped a personality or personal identity is created. Collections are created out of constant societal action-reaction processes. They ultimately organize the boundaries of society and express the individual's existence (in relation to others).

## 5.2 Competition

The above mentioned factors of association leads to collections of people and objects that, finally, identifies social relations and organizes the social domain. Organization leads to a hierarchy where both objects and people are assigned social positions that reflect their value and standings in relation to each other.

Consumption both sets and provokes the boundaries of society. Due to more complex and actively involved relations with objects, consumption results in people 'commoditizing' themselves. They do so by consuming the meanings and values that are assigned to objects. The process can be looked upon as either the conversion of subjects (social actors-humans) into objects, or of the creation of

'social actors' via the appropriation of objects. Either way both people and objects become interchangeable.

Due to the high numbers of active members in consumption, defending one's rightful place in society becomes imperative. When one can easily be replaced by the next product or person, so it is vital to stay that 'one step ahead'. Conditions in society undergo constant change, both as a result of, and in causing, new relations and associations. The more associations an individual object or person is 'involved' in, the more options they have to continue their spreading of networks if one or more relations end abruptly. Those who are able to stay ahead (or 'get ahead') of others actors defend a right to a higher positioning in the hierarchy.

So, in looking back on the original question, objects promote social identification processes as a result of their genericism. This genericism allows room for the objects to be filled with meanings and to be organized in relation to other significant meanings. The relations created out of this organization form the basic social networks within society. Processes of consuming object meanings widens individual networks which increases social status. This provokes social competition and leads to differentiation in society by means of social status positions that may be defined hierarchically. Although each status may be defined (i.e. higher or lower status in respect to another actors position), the witholding of a status is by no means unequivocal. An actor must fight to consistently stay ahead of his comrades, in his expansion of social relations with both objects and humans, in order to maintain his ‘place’ in society. Maintaining one's place in society requires intense competitive consumer behaviours.

# 6 Reference

## Articles


**Feinberg**, Richard A. & Jennifer Meoli. 1991. 'A Brief History of the Mall'. *Advances in Consumer Research*. Vol 18. UT Association for Consumer Research. Pages 426-427.

**Hui**, Sam K., Eric T. Bradlow & Peter S. Fader. 2009. ”Testing Behavioral Hypotheses Using an Integrated Model of Grocery Store Shopping Path and Purchase Behavior”. *Journal of Consumer Research*. Vol. 36. Issue 3. pages 478-493

**Kahn**, Barbara E. & Alice M. Isen. 1993. ”The Influence of Positive Affect on Variety Seeking among Safe, Enjoyable Products”. *Journal of Consumer Research*. Vol. 20. Issue 2. University of Chicago Press. Pages 257-270

**Mokhtarian**, Patricia L., David T. Ory & Xinyu Cao. 2009. 'Shopping Related Attitudes: A Factor and Cluster Analysis of Northern California Shoppers'. *Environment & Planning B: Planning & Design.* Vol. 36. Issue 2. Pages 204-228

**Staeheli**, Lynn A. & Don Mitchell. 2006. ”USA's Destiny? Regulating Space and Creating Community in American Shopping Malls”. *Urban Studies*. Vol. 43 No. 5/6. Routledge. pages 977-992

**Stebbins**, Robert. 2006. ”Shopping as leisure, obligation, and community”, *Leisure/Loisir.* Vol. 30:2. Routledge. Pages 467-474 [Accessed online via http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all?content=10.1080/14927713.2006.9651367, 09-12-2010]

**Tyler May**, Elaine. 2001. 'The Pressure to Provide: Class, Consumerism, and Divorce in Urban America, 1880-1920'. *Journal of Social History.* Vol. 12. Issue 2. John Hopkins University Press; Project Muse

**Whan Park**, C., Easwar S. Iyer & Daniel C. Smith. 1989. ”The Effects of Situational Factors on In-Store Grocery Shopping Behaviour: The Role of Store Environment and Time Available for Shopping”. *Journal of Consumer Research*. Vol. 15. Issue 4. University of Chicago Press. Pages 422-433

# Books

**Agar**, Michael H. 1985. *Speaking of Ethnography*. Sage University Paper Series on Qualitative Research Methods. Vol. 2. California: Sage

**Appadurai**, Arjun. 1986. 'Introduction: commodities and the politics of value', in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Appadurai, A. (ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

**Barnard**, Alan & Spencer, Jonathan (eds).1998. *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*. London: New York Routledge. [accessed online via LUVIT portal]

**Baudrillard**, Jean.

1981. *For a critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St. Louis: Telos.

1998. *The Consumer Society*. London: Sage Publications

2001. *Impossible Exchange*. London: Verso

2005. *The System of Objects*. London: Verso

**Bauman**, Zygmunt.

2008. *The Art of Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press

2007. *Consuming Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press

**Clarke**, D. B. 2000. 'Space, knowledge and consumption' in Bryson, J. R., Daniels, P. W., Henry, N. D., and Pollard, J. S. (eds). *Knowledge, Space, Economy*. London: Routledge. pp.209–225

**Douglas**, M.

1966 [2008]. 'External Boundaries' in McGee, R. Jon & Warms, R. L., *Anthropological Theory: An Introductory History*. Fourth Edition. New York: McGraw-Hill

1996 [1979]. Douglas, M & Baron Isherwood. *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption.* New York: Basic Books

**Falk**, Pasi & C. Campbell. 1997. *The Shopping Experience*. London: Sage Publications

**Goldschmidt**, W. 1960. *Understanding Human Society*. London: Routledge

**Halter**, Marilyn. 2000. *Shopping for Identity*. New York: Schocken Books

**Henare**, A., M. Holbraad & S. Wastell. 2007. *Thinking Through Things; Theorising Artefacts Ethnographically*. New York: Routledge.

**Jordan**, A.T. 2003. *Business Anthropology*. University of North Texas: Waveland Press

**Lévi-Strauss**, C. 1963 [1967]. *Structural Anthropology*. Translated by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books

**Mackay**, H. (red). 1997. *Consumption and Everyday Life*. Milton Keynes: Sage Publications

**Marx**, K.

1970 [1859]. 'Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy', in Marx, K. and F. Engels. *Selected Works in One Volume*. London: Lawrence and Wishart. pp. 180-4

1973. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. Harmondsworth: Penguin

**McKendrick**, N., J. Brewer and J.H. Plumb. 1982. The Birth of a Consumer Society. Bloomington: Indiana University Press

**Miller**, Daniel.

1998. P. Jackson, N. Thrift, B. Holbrook & M. Rowlands. *Shopping, Place and Identity*. London: Routledge

2001. *The Dialectics of Shopping*, London: University of Chicago Press.

2008. *The Comfort of Things*. Cambridge: Polity Press

**Ortner**, Sherry B. 2006. *Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject*. London: Duke University Press

**Strathern**, Marilyn. 1992. *Reproducing the Future: Anthropology, Kinship and the New Reproductive Technologies*. Manchester: University of Manchester Press

**Trentmann**, Frank. 2006. 'Genealogy of the Consumer' in *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives: Historical Trajectories, Transnational Exchanges*, ed. Brewer, J & Trentmann, F. New York: Berg.

**Woodward**, Ian. 2007. *Understanding Material Culture*. London: Sage Publications

# Websites

**Ryan**, Dan. http://mills-soc116.wikidot.com/notes-durkheim-collective-representations, accessed 29-12-2010.

[i] This introduction will only give a brief overview of these aspects of the discussion so as to give the reader a basic understanding of the background behind the purpose of the paper's argument. This is also so as to avoid burying the reader under piles of excess information with this part of the discussion.

[ii] See also Ron Fricke's documentary film ***Baraka*** from 1992 (Magidson Films).

[iii] The specifics of defining social positioning and status 'types' varies greatly from each study. To keep this explanation as simple as possible (so as not to stray from the main argument), these are the definitions and terms that have been chosen for use.