

Reading Guide – Week 6 Day 2 – Consumers as Cultural Producers

Henry Jenkins, "Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching" (1988)
and John Fiske, "Shopping for Pleasure" (1989)

How do the consumer goods and services that we consume acquire meaning?

Let's begin by considering how theorists whose work we have already read have answered this question.

According to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, the meaning of mass-produced goods is determined by capitalist elites who control the "culture industry." Through the seductive and distracting goods they produce, their goal is to convince ordinary people to comply with the dictates of consumer capitalism.

Thorstein Veblen and Pierre Bourdieu argue that consumer goods reflect the social status and relative taste of their possessors. When people consume, they stake out a position of social power. The meaning of consumer goods is thus tied to the hierarchization of social space. Bourdieu goes as far as to suggest that consumption is a site of class conflict.

Today we are considering the work of Henry Jenkins and John Fiske, who offer us additional ways of thinking about consumption. Jenkins discusses Star Trek fandom and Fiske discusses mall shoppers' subversive behavior. Both emphasize consumers' active role in constituting the meanings of the goods and services they purchase. For them, consumption is not passive, but *participatory*; not individual, but *collaborative*. In stark contrast to Adorno and Horkheimer, who argue that mass-produced goods are tools for rendering consumers submissive, Jenkins and Fiske believe that such goods are merely raw material from which consumers fashion their own, often subversive, meanings.

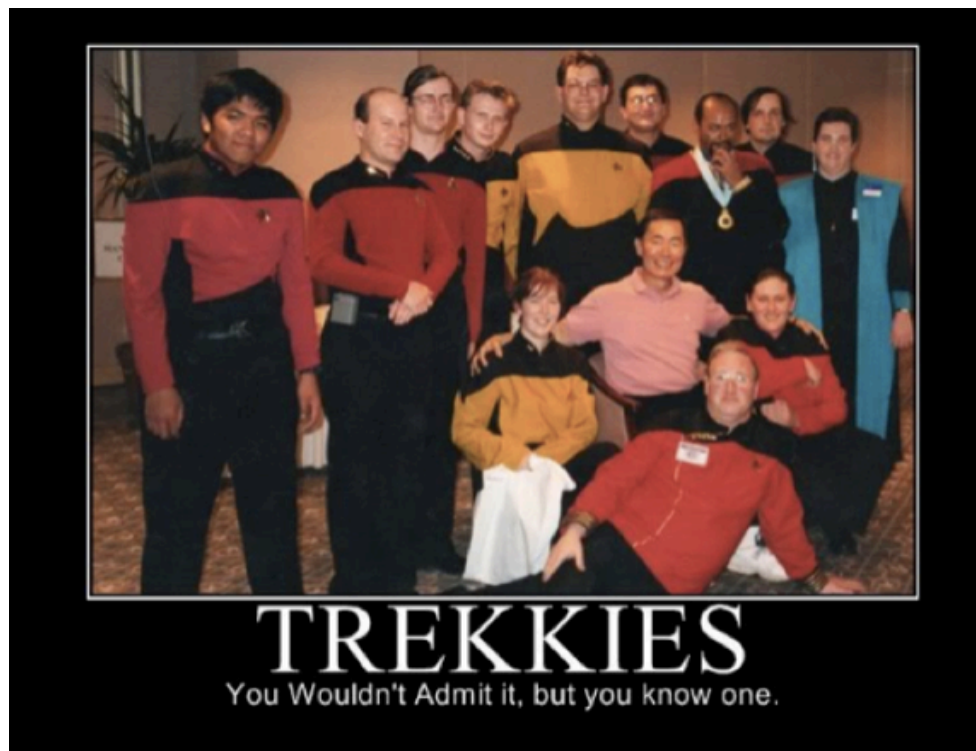
While *Star Trek* and mall shopping are passé, Jenkins' and Fiske's ideas can be applied to more current consumer behavior. I hope we can discuss some of those other applications in class this week.

Section Title: Henry Jenkins on Star Trek Fandom

The original *Star Trek* series only ran for three seasons in the late 1960s, but it spawned a dedicated fandom. While we might not be familiar with Star Trek fan fiction or fan art, we have all heard of Star Trek conventions and can conjure what attendees look like.

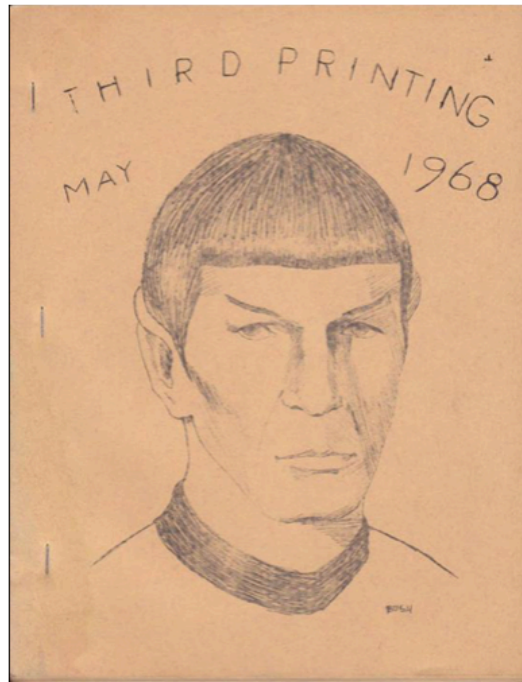
When William Shatner, who performed the character of Captain James T. Kirk, hosted *Saturday Night Live* in 1986, the episode featured [a skit that reinforced the stereotype of Star Trek fans](#). The skit portrays fans as out of control and undisciplined consumers who are socially

inept and as obsessed with trivia, celebrity, and collectibles. The poster below conveys a similar message:



Jenkins counters this dismissive message. He argues that fans are not trivia-obsessed social misfits but producers of cultural meaning. He writes: "You become a fan not by being a regular viewer, but by translating viewing into cultural activity." He emphasizes that fandom is social and participatory, not isolated or passive.

Fans rewrite media to meet their needs. For underrepresented subcultural groups, fandom is a vehicle to create space for their cultural concerns. Jenkins uses the example of Star Trek fanzines, in which women rewrote the Star Trek to focus more on romantic and interpersonal relationships among the crew. Below is the cover of "Spockanalia," the first fanzine written by women:



Six issues of Spockanalia, an early Star Trek fanzine, were produced in the late 1960s.

Jenkins notes that fans often conflict with copyright owners because their interpretation of the media narrative is different from the owners' intended reading. When members of a fan community take a previously written text and transform it to meet their needs, Jenkins calls this textual poaching.

Fans don't understand themselves as "stealing" the copyright owner's narrative. Instead they understand themselves to be *rescuing* it. They engage in textual poaching to keep their "pure" version of the narrative alive in the face of opposition from production companies and studios.



Among Star Trek fans, a distinction is drawn between fanfiction and slash fiction. The distinction emerged to allow a dedicated space for homoerotic fan narratives and fan art focusing on the relationship between Captain Kirk and his first officer, Spock.

Section Title: Shopping for Pleasure

While Jenkins discusses how consumers produce meaning in the context of media fandom, Fiske focuses on consumer's productive activity in a different consumer context: the shopping mall. Fiske argues that malls are not grand "cathedrals of consumption," as their owners and would have them be; often, they sites of consumer resistance instead. He writes:

Shopping is the crisis of consumerism: it is where the art and tricks of the weak can inflict the most damage on, and exert the most power over, the strategic interests of the powerful. The shopping mall that is seen as the terrain of guerrilla warfare looks quite different from the one constructed by the metaphor of religion. (Fiske, 12)

If the ideal consumer is an affluent adult who visits the mall with the intention to buy, the space also admits many other, less ideal visitors. Fiske found that 80 percent of unemployed people visited the mall at least once a week, and nearly 100 percent of young unemployed women were regular visitors. Mall walkers use the space for exercise, not shopping. But Fiske's favorite subversive mall participants are teenagers.



Teenagers at the mall.

While teens are less drawn to the mall as a space of sociability in 2020 than they were in decades past, their presence there continues to confound mall authorities. Teens have less disposable income than adults. They go to the mall to socialize with peers. They congregate in food courts and engage in boisterous, performative behavior. By their presence, they crowd out or intimidate "legitimate" shoppers.

In response, some malls have attempted to proscribe teen activity or ban unaccompanied teens from visiting the mall altogether. Such efforts speak to Fiske's insight that consumers are not passive dupes of consumption but potentially disruptive, resisting subjects. He writes:

In the practices of consumption the commodity system is exposed to the power of the consumer, for the power of the system is not just top-down, or center-outward, but always two-way, always a flux of conflicting powers and resistances. (Fiske, 25)

Section Title: Conclusion

Fiske and Jenkins explore how consumers wield resistive power, imbuing the goods and services they consume with alternative meanings. Both scholars also accentuate the *social* dimension of consumption. Fandoms are participatory subcultures whose members form "interpretive communities." Teens (and other groups) recreate shopping malls and other consumer spaces as sites of sociability.

How are these authors' perspectives on consumerism different from that of Adorno and Horkheimer in "The Culture Industry"?

Finally, as we look toward our class meeting this week, I look forward to hearing your reflections on the subversive potential of present-day teen consumption. Also, I look forward to hearing how (or if) you show active fandom for the media you consume.

Sources:

John Fiske, "Shopping for Pleasure: Malls, Power, and Resistance," 1989, *The Consumer Society Reader*, ed. Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt (New York: The New Press, 2000), 306-328.

Henry Jenkins, "Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 5:2 (June 1988).