

# The World in a Trolley

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This critical reflection will examine a normal aspect of most people's lives – a trip to the supermarket. It will explore this regular excursion with an emphasis on globalisation, consumerism and Fordism.

As I walk around the supermarket aisles I notice a variety of foods from across the globe available to purchase, and contemplate how globalisation has had an impact on this constantly available supply. Globalisation is a cultural phenomenon that has spread through contemporary

societies

worldwide

(Robertson,

1992). It is a

slippery term

that has multiple

meanings and

can be

understood in

several different

ways, although

several debates around globalisation suggest

we now live in a shrinking world with the

compression of both time and space (Harvey,

1989). How and when we are able to access

and consume goods has been transformed. This

has resulted in supermarkets that are

frequently sourcing products from global

suppliers, providing consumers with more

choice. This allows us to pick and choose from

our favourite aspects of many different cultures

as this new global reach is allowing goods to be

sourced from foreign suppliers all year,

irrespective of the season (Giddens, 2002).

I pick up a bottle of olive oil and despite the packaging boldly stating "Italian olive oil", I am

sceptical about its authenticity. I scan the ingredients and instead of imprinting the image in my head of the rustic Italian countryside this olive oil was sourced from, I discover a mere 15% of the oil contained is Italian, with the rest obtained from destinations as diverse as Greece and Turkey. Globalisation is allowing products to be globally sourced as inexpensively as possible, lowering products' quality (Mak et al, 2012). This shows how firms are using clever marketing techniques to make products seem more genuine than in reality.

The globe is littered with countless amounts of different legal jurisdictions and different nations, all with unique rules regarding tax and production, allowing companies to base their production units anywhere globally (Ibid). For large supermarkets the challenge purely seems to be to discover where is best to locate their production facilities in

order to make products that seem authentic, yet produced at the lowest possible cost.

Despite my initial disappointment, I walk to the fruit and veg section and do feel the benefits of globalisation. I pick up some strawberries, which only a short time ago were picked from a fruit farm 800 miles away in Spain. This enables me to choose the content and complexity of my diet, and even encourages me to do so with the variety of healthy foods available. The quantity of food being sourced from abroad has doubled since 1974 with the prediction that the amount of food being flown in to the UK will continue to rise (Mak et al, 2012). 50% of vegetables and an astonishing 95% of fruit eaten in the UK each year are



imported (Ibid). The distance food travels to reach us has a considerably negative impact on the environment. The majority of food is transported by air, which has the worst effect on pollution, generating far greater emissions than other alternatives. Imports by airplanes have a substantial impact on global warming as it is stated in 2005, imports to the UK released 70,000 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>, which is the equivalent of an extra 12,000 cars on the road. This was purely to import fruit, nuts and vegetables. Not only does this have negative impacts on the environment, but can also have serious health implications, such as increasing rates of asthma (Elert, 2012).

Society is becoming increasingly demanding with the range of products that are now expected to be available. If a product is not stocked we find this unacceptable and expect an explanation.

Baudrillard (1994) explains the concept of abundance and how products are always fully stocked making consumers believe this is a global norm, when in fact the world is not as



supermarkets portray. Data shows if everyone consumed like the average American we would need over 4 times the land the globe has to live. Comparing this to living like a citizen of Bangladesh, data shows that we would only populate 0.4% of the entire globe (Elert, 2012). This shows globalisation and consumption in Western societies are stretching the Earth's resources to extremes.

Marx (1859, cited in McLellan, 2000: 57) turns to his concept of Commodity Fetishism to understand the apparently magical quality and availability of products. Marx argues that producers remain hidden, concealing the labour put in by workers to make these objects. This allows consumers to distance themselves from the conditions many are put in to make these products, allowing the market to appear to exist independently of individuals. This means we consume without considering the

consequences, which can be seen in low figure of only 4% of supermarkets sold products that are fair trade, although this figure is slowly rising (Yamoah et al, 2013).

I am however experiencing this differently to others, and only those living a similar lifestyle to myself will understand the benefits as I do. As a student living in a Western, developed society I am able to make sophisticated choices when consuming, whereas someone living in Bangladesh may only have access to locally grown crops. This is a rather drastic comparison to make, as even people living in the same area as me within my age group may understand consumption differently, depending on their class and financial situation.

Globalisation plays a vital role in the development of consumer society that has led to a surplus of international brands (Hewison, 2012). During the last 30 years supermarkets have been a leading force in transforming how we consume (Humphrey, 1998). Supermarkets have been expanding and what once provided our daily food needs, now caters a range of products from food, media and even health services (Humphrey, 2007). Despite this Humphrey (2007) states that several cultures' foods do not make the cut to be stocked on supermarket shelves, as they are less popular among consumers, therefore only benefitting suppliers that can provide goods that are popular at the given time.

As I walk down the CD and film aisle I see products available in a variety of different language. Pieterse (2010) terms this cultural and global "hybridisation", stating that consumable cultural factors from across the world can be localised, allowing diverse influences to be present when constructing one's identity. This arguably leads to an increasingly reflexive consumerism, as modern individuals can now construct their identity as they desire through the increasing choices offered. Previously consumption appeared to be a reflection of an individual's existing

identity (Beckett & Nayak, 2008). Bauman (1988) argues consumers are now liberated, having a new freedom and ability to express individuality. However, Ynhfalk (2012) states that we are still only able to consume products from a small selection offered. Marcuse (2013) states we are tied to consumerism and constantly being told what products to consume.

Consumption is however questionable; we appear to think we are told what to buy, but this may not be the case. It appears not all aspects of our lives are controlled by consumption, for example we may be friends with someone for their personality rather than their clothing. However Newman, (2010) argues that we dress in similar ways to our friends, to both fit in and shape our identity in an acceptable way.

It is argued that a variety of goods are being consumed, moving beyond our basic needs (Marcuse, 2013).

This is shown in the supermarket when I walk in to the home section. I spot an item that at first I assumed was a small space ship, but at a closer inspection it is a souped-up iron including 17 different parts, flashing lights and even its own base. Consumption appears to have become revolutionised in a Post-Fordist era as society is led by consumer demands rather than the older Fordist style that left consumers with less choices or room for demand (Chambers, 2011). This means that more individualised products are available that appear to reflect individual identities (James, 2009). Consumption has become a social and cultural process where we now buy in to what we desire not necessarily what we need (Ibid). Featherstone (1991) argues this has positive effects on society as it allows consumers to shape their identity how they want with the amount of choice now presented to us. Supermarkets are able to target products to us individually by basing consumption on consumer demands gained through



surveillance techniques such as store loyalty cards.

However, I find some areas of consumption mirror a Fordist culture. Firstly, the supermarket itself, as it houses all products under one roof. On top of this all acts shoppers take part in seem to be based around maximum time efficiency, with customers being concerned about obstacles in queues and getting stressed with people taking an unusually long time to pay (Meyer, 2003). This reflects Fordism as the production lines based around maximum time efficiency defined the Fordist era (Farnes, 1993). This allows companies to make as much profit as possible at the expense of oblivious customers.

When looking at self-service checkouts upon my exit, it appears that customers are taking part in unpaid labour in a process that again resembles a production line. Despite the fact one employee has been trained to look after a

handful of machines, it is obvious that the supermarket has drastically cut down on cashier numbers by forcing customers to scan their own shopping. Not only is this a stressful and time-consuming for customers, it is also degrading for the supervisors of these machines who have had their job replaced. This shows that employees are being exploited to make as much money as possible for the company, as the technology used to substitute cashiers do not take a wage. This reflects the process of exploitation of labour (Bobcock, 1993), as it states the purpose of labour is linked with capitalist exploitation to make the company maximum profit, by decreasing their workforce to increase their profit margin (Ibid).

As I walk towards the exit of the supermarket, I stop and reflect on how something I once saw as a mundane weekly task has been unpicked to be seen in such a more complex manner. Howard & Seth (1969) state we live in a world where what we see as ordinary daily tasks, affect us in ways we are oblivious to.



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#### **Picture 1:**

<http://www.dreamstime.com/royalty-free-stock-photography-world-shopping-trolley-image18439257>

#### **Picture 2:**

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/news/8895923/Tesco-trials-augmented-reality.html>

#### **Picture 3:**

<http://www.theguardian.com/money/2011/jun/08/gas-and-food-bills-soar>