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Latin America, the region including Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America, is undergoing rapid changes in consumer-based identities, consumption practices, and material culture. Over time, its peoples have developed “hybrid” consumer cultures combining European, North American, indigenous, and African goods, rituals, and attitudes and reflecting the region’s political and economic subordination to European and U.S. states. Scholarship on consumer culture in Latin America began in earnest in the 1980s, though observations regarding consumers appeared earlier. The region is of interest because it evidences patterns found in wealthy countries --individualization, ownership concentration in the media industry, modern retail formats, and consumers’ quest for authentic experiences-- while retaining its distinct cultures and history. The region’s history and consumption patterns are reviewed alongside the case of Chile, a country whose free market policies significantly altered its consumer landscape. Suggestions are offered for further research.

**Historical Features**

Spain and Portugal (and to a lesser extent, Britain, France, and the Netherlands) colonized Latin America beginning in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Europeans found a sophisticated material culture, especially within the Aztec and Inca empires. Beginning in the sixteenth century, Europeans brought African slaves with distinct cultures to the continent. During the colonial era, Europeans, native peoples and Africans formed families, forming a hybrid culture including elements from each group.
Arnold Bauer’s, *Goods, Power, History* contends that during the colonial era (1492 until 1824), Europeans attempted to impose their food, dress, town planning, and religious rituals on mixed-race (mestizo), native peoples. Many members of the latter groups attempted to imitate the Europeans through dress or behavior to improve their quality of life (or in the case of native people, to escape labor and tax obligations). Still, many indigenous and African communities retained pre-colonial dress, food, adornment, and rituals, while others adapted imported goods to local contexts. After the Latin American independence wars (1810-1824), Latin American-born “creole” elites emulated of French and British elites’ consumption styles to distinguish themselves from their mestizo, indigenous, or black countrymen; mestizos emulated elites; and rural native peoples living in separate communities retained consumption traditions.

Following the onset of the Great Depression in 1929-1931, Latin American governments sought to reduce their reliance on export sales to gain hard currency needed to purchase imported manufactured goods, adopting policies that protected or helped create local manufacturers. These “import substitution industrialization” policies coincided with elites’ increased support for national identities defined as “mestizo” rather than “white.” The era witnessed the standardization of domestic consumer goods and government promotion of locally-based cultural activities and products (particularly film and folk arts).

Since the 1970s and 1980s, policies reducing government controls over production and trade contributed to the increased influence of U.S.-based products, retailers, brands and multimedia entertainment, reflecting the process of globalization -- increased economic, political, social, and cultural connections across regions and nations.
Current research asks the following questions: a) is globalization changing Latin American cultures through the introduction of North American and European models of consumption?; b) are new forms of consumption making Latin Americans more individualistic, oriented toward private life, and politically apathetic?; and c) how do new forms of consumption intersect with social inequality?

Néstor García Canclini’s, Consumers and Citizens, contends that Latin American tastes in entertainment products are becoming more “Americanized” and privatized. The author uses survey and interview data to argue that social identities formerly rooted in political participation (through unions, associations, or parties) are increasingly linked to membership in global consumption-based communities, such as groups of rock music fans. This change reflects decreasing state support for domestic entertainment industries, declining popularity of political ideologies promoting social change, and more concentrated U.S. corporate ownership of entertainment industries. He finds variations in consumer tastes in film, television, and art across age groups and social classes, but notes that Latin Americans mostly watch U.S. film and TV programs in their homes.

Rudi Colloredo-Mansfeld’s, The Native Leisure Class, analyzes native people in the city of Otavalo, Ecuador, and argues that globalization has promoted the revival of indigenous culture. Native weavers and merchants have gained commercial success selling local and regional crafts to U.S. and European customers seeking “authentic” goods. They display growing wealth by sponsoring traditional fiestas, wearing expensive native dress, and building homes in their native city. Their increased wealth has intensified class divisions in Otavalo.
Richard Wilk’s, *Home Cooking in the Global Village*, a history of food in Belize (the former British colony in Central America) shows that since Europeans’ first arrival to its territory, Belize has relied on both imported and domestic ingredients in foods. However, most Belizeans rejected native dishes until the late 20th Century. British colonial officials encouraged local employees to consume imported processed foods, giving imports high status among middle and upper class Belizeans (though the latter secretly enjoyed “bush food,” traditional rural cuisine using locally-based ingredients), while poor Belizeans developed unique recipes mixing local and imported ingredients. When Belizeans migrated to the U.S. during the 1970s, they missed local foods and opened restaurants selling national dishes. U.S. tourists in Belize sought “unique” local food, and returning Belizeans opened restaurants there while taking pride in local dishes. Contemporary globalization created the conditions through which local foods became popular among Belizeans.

Maureen O’ Dougherty’s, *Consumption Intensified*, studies how Brazil’s middle class coped with that country’s extremely high inflation during the 1980s. The author finds that members of this group went to great lengths to maintain their socioeconomic status. They purchased foreign goods during trips to the U.S., visited Disneyworld, and bought imports in illegal Brazilian markets, all to retain their membership in Brazil’s middle class. Each of these studies shows the complex and unpredictable effects of contemporary globalization on local subjects.

**Consumer Culture in Chile**

Because of its free market economic policies, Chile would seem the most likely Latin American country to embrace American and global consumer products, images,
and ideas. Beginning in the 1970s during General Augusto Pinochet’s authoritarian rule (1973-1990), the government applied free market policies such as privatization of businesses and services, tax reductions on imports, and deregulation of urban land markets. Since the late 1970s, but most forcefully after 1990, Chile has witnessed a boom in shopping centers, big box stores, gated communities, and credit card use; as well as the consumption of American, European and Japanese television, film, music, and products.

Scholars have competing interpretations of these developments. Tomás Moulian’s, *El consume me consume*, contends that Chileans are status conscious consumers caught in a cycle of debt and spending who find an outlet for hedonistic desires through shopping mall visits. In contrast, Eugenio Tironi’s *La irrupción de las masas y el malestar de las elites*, views growing purchases among low and moderate income Chileans as evidence of the democratization of consumption. In a third view, the Programa de las Naciones Unidas Para el Desarrollo’s (PNUD), *Nosotros, los chilenos*, argues that Chileans develop their identities through consumer goods and images, reflecting the “aestheticization of everyday life.

Others question the view that Chileans are increasingly individualistic consumers. Heidi Tinsman’s “The Politics of Gender and Consumption in Authoritarian Chile, 1973-1990” finds that female agricultural workers used earnings to gain independence from husbands, give gifts to friends, and challenge traditional gender norms. Joel Stillerman’s, “Gender, Class and Generational Contexts for Consumption in Contemporary Chile” found that working class male wage-earners largely control family budgets while men and women exhibit distinct priorities for household expenses. Spouses restrict personal consumption to provide for children and elderly parents and to uphold the moral value of self-control.
Conclusion

Like the rest of Latin America, Chile provides ambiguous evidence regarding the effects of globalization on consumer practices and identities. Survey research and comparisons within and beyond the region will illuminate the attitudes and practices of consumers across social groups while rooting analyses in comparative and theoretical debates. Ethnographic, audiovisual, and autobiographical inquiry will provide insight into consumer subjectivities and the integration of consumption into everyday routines. Examination of youth subcultures, digital cultures, and variations across racial and ethnic groups will enrich our understanding of diverse consumer groups.

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Bibliography


