

Communication and Consumption in Modern History (19th and 20th centuries)

Consumption has become central in defining human activity. What we choose to consume, and what we refuse to consume, is an important part of how we define ourselves. Three specific fields of research within the history of consumption societies are developed below: consumer advocacy, persuasion, and fashions. In addition, such themes can be taken within the Nordic Branding project, that is a part of the UiO:Norden initiative. Studies can focus on precise examples or cases, whether based on Norwegian or foreign sources, situated within the wider frame exposed here. Language of supervision and feedback can be Norwegian or English; theses can be written either in Norwegian or in English.

Examples of already supervised and ongoing theses are:

- The beginnings of the advertising industry in Norway
- Norwegian advertising during WW2
- Youth and the British fashion industry in the 1960s
- A history of denim in Norway

1. Consumption societies and consumer advocacy

During the Modern period, the conscience of being a consumer developed along with critical discourses and reformist actions. Critiques and alternatives addressing consumption societies developed in consumers' leagues and cooperative movements. Such movements show the emergence of self-reflecting consumers and citizens, from the involvement of religious charities in good consumption practices, to blacklisting and boycott. Studies can focus on sectors of production and consumption, and movements in consumer advocacy.

2. Persuasion

Advertising slowly developed in Europe during the Ancien Régime, but it is in 19th Century United States that the expertise of commercial persuasion became a profession. Between the advertiser and the media (initially mostly the press and posters), a new type of professionals, the admen, appeared. Cases can approach the history of national and multinational advertising agencies, the development of brands and campaigns, the evolution of marketing techniques and technicians in peace and in wartime, and the birth of the public relations expertise.

The relations between advertising and propaganda know-how and techniques in 20th century Europe and United States also remain under-researched. While propaganda and advertising are conceptually distinct, the former belonging to the political sphere of human activity and the latter to the economical sphere, practices like political marketing and public relations have contributed to blur this distinction. In some cases, historical scholarship has underlined the convergence - or even the identity - of advertising and propaganda, of commercial and of political communication. This is an ongoing debate that is taking place in the historical and sociological fields. Historical research shows that the vocabulary and the practices have woven many links between the two disciplines of propaganda and of advertising. Thesis projects can develop comparative approaches on propaganda and advertising know-how, techniques, and technicians.

3. Aesthetics and functionality

Aesthetics play a central role in the building of consumption societies. Modern industrialization has meant deep changes in production, often translated in tensions between aesthetics and economics, between art and commerce. In market economies, consumption societies developed along the lines of fashion systems, including mechanisms of emulation, copying, distinction, and planned obsolescence.

Cases studies about enterprises as well as about production and consumption patterns can be studied to approach these tensions, for example with a focus on the history of fashion businesses, workers, and designers; on beauty, cosmetics and hygiene. The history of counterfeiting and piracy, of the intellectual property of design and technical innovation, and the development of black and grey markets for consumer goods, are also relevant topics within the scope of this research.

4. Nordic Branding

The recently awarded Nordic Branding project (part of UiO:Norden) will allow students interested in any of the topic above to benefit from the integration of their work within this research initiative (dir. M. Langford). In this respect, works seeking to explore the intersection of the definition of the nation and the brand (including the work of communication agencies and lobbyists) are most welcome.

Veronique Pouillard works with associate professors Sunniva Engh, Eirinn Larsen, and Hallvard Notaker on the Nordic Branding project at IAKH. Co-direction of theses is very welcome. Theses and supervision can be in English and in the Scandinavian languages.