

Introduction: Canada's Usable Past: Consumer Technologies in Historical Perspective

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Canada's Usable Past: Consumer Technologies in Historical Perspective

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From automobiles to smart phones, personal technology has come to shape the lives of all Canadians. Yet, consumer technology as a subject of historical analysis in Canada has lagged behind American and European studies. International scholars have contributed to a lengthy discussion about consumer behaviour, technologies, and evaluations of entire technological systems. This body of literature demonstrates that many factors—gender, culture, geography, to name a few—determine the social acceptance of any consumer technology.

Sociologists were the first to question the social implications of consumption and patterns of consumer behaviour, and have inspired some of the key historical methods for investigating consumer technology. Thorstein Veblen, whose description of America's nineteenth-century leisure class as participants in the "conspicuous consumption" of material goods, continues to inform historical inquiries of consumption practices throughout the twentieth century.¹ Other classic sociological works by Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and Pierre Bourdieu suggested that consumer goods were also markers of social status by demonstrating that consumers developed a drive to consume that extended far beyond pure necessity. These studies indicate that goods carry meanings that are often socially constructed according to individual or societal values and attitudes.

Since the 1970s, historians of technology have also adopted social constructivism from sociologists to investigate the integration of consumer goods into everyday life. In their article, "The Social Construction of Facts and Artifacts," Trevor Pinch and Wiebe Bijker contend that there is more than one possible way of designing, thinking

1. Thorstein Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, ed. Martha Banta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 49–69.

about, or interpreting artifacts. “Different social groups,” the authors write, “can have radically different interpretations of one technological artifact.”² This “interpretive flexibility” forms part of a larger methodological approach called the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT). SCOT acknowledges the active participation of designers, manufacturers, and most significantly for the present volume, consumers, in assigning meaning to technology. An increased emphasis during the 1980s and 1990s on “the mutual shaping of technology and society” encouraged a more nuanced investigation into the layers of meaning embedded in consumer goods.

The authors in this present volume have embraced the spirit of SCOT in their studies of consumer technologies. Jacqueline McIsaac examines how geography informed usage of photographic technology in her article “Cameras in the Countryside.” Drawing from glass plate negatives of amateur photographers, McIsaac notes those who adopted camera technology often did so as a leisure activity and operated within a distinct rural framework that reinforced the social values of late Victorian-era rural Ontario. McIsaac contends that by using photographic negatives, as historians, we can better appreciate how rural residents saw their own environments; the camera user’s choice of subject matter, collectively, reveals how rural residents saw beauty and significance in the world around them.

Also with an eye on rural Ontario, Rebecca Beusaert explores the gendered implications of a technology that exploded in popularity in the late nineteenth century: the bicycle. As a form of transportation and a tool for leisure, the bicycle took on several meanings by various social groups: as a status symbol among men, a technology of liberation for women, and a threat to gender norms among social reformers. In her article, “‘Young Rovers’ and ‘Dazzling Lady Meteors,’” Beusaert explores how bicycles, and the accompanying bicycle clubs that proliferated with the rising usage of the bicycle, contributed to the social construction of gender norms as these clubs challenged traditional notions about the interaction of men and women in public space.

While some consumer technologies, like the bicycle, challenge gender norms, others can reinforce them. Emily Gann investigates this latter phenomenon in her article, “Ironing Out the Wrinkles”, which examines aesthetic changes in domestic irons in turn-of-the-twentieth century

2. Trevor J. Pinch and Wiebe E. Bijker, “The Social Construction of Facts and Artifacts: Or How the Sociology of Science and the Sociology of Technology Might Benefit Each Other” in *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology* eds. Wiebe Bijker, Thomas P. Hughes, and Trevor Pinch (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987), 41.

Canada to decipher changing societal conceptions about ironing. Drawing from the domestic iron collection housed at the Canadian Museum of Science and Technology, Gann uses a material culture approach to demonstrate that although their function remained largely unchanged, changes in the domestic iron's form reflected changes in the social dynamic of middle class homes. As more and more wives completed household tasks, like ironing, to compensate for dwindling numbers of domestic servants, the iron itself was beautified to appeal to the "user rather than the process of labour."

Middle class Canadian homes were also the site of a debate over the social meaning of children's toys. In his article, "Making (Anti)Modern Childhood," Braden P.L. Hutchinson explores the production and consumption of children's toys during the so-called "toy famine" of the First World War. Children, traditionally consumers on the periphery, were pushed to the center of an ideological struggle between industry (backed by government) and craft production (backed by middle and upper class women) over socially acceptable forms of toy production. Hutchinson reveals how the debate over these sometimes complementary, but often opposing, methods reflected broader societal concerns about the interplay between family life, industrialization, and consumer culture in Canada.

A technology is often subject to competing social interests, and Andrea Benoit investigates the contested meanings of lipstick in her article, "'Changing the World and Transforming Lives'." She explores how VIVA GLAM, a lipstick produced by the originally-Canadian MAC Cosmetics, both represented and challenged traditional notions of femininity while also raising questions about the consumptive aspects of consumer history. MAC used the lipstick as a fundraising tool for AIDS initiatives, and made non-conventional celebrities RuPaul and k.d. lang the faces of its campaign—raising questions of gender and sexuality in the process. Benoit's study captures how a technology, despite experiencing very little change in form or function for much of its existence, can take on very different meanings over time and space.

The articles in this special volume place consumers front and centre within the history of technology in Canada. Doing so serves as a reminder that no technology enters society without some negotiation of meaning. While some technologies reinforce the status quo, others are used as instruments to challenge what is perceived as "normal". Exploring the social construction of consumer technologies provides a unique perspective for investigating Canada's usable past.