

BBC Learning English

Talk about English

Live webcast
Consumerism



About this script

Please note that this is not a word for word transcript of the programme as broadcast. In the recording process changes may have been made which will not be reflected here.

Jackie: Hello, you're listening to Talk About English, coming to you live from our offices in London. So if you hear any banging doors or whirring photocopiers it's because everyone's running around working hard, making Learning English programmes. Today, I'm joined by Jo Reffin.

Jo: Hello.

Jackie: Presenting with us for the first time – so you can have the honour of telling us what's coming up in the programme:

Jo: Well the focus of today's programme is consumerism. We'll take a special look at Japan, we'll hear some of your views on consumerism in your country, and details of how you can win an mp3 player.

Jackie: So our theme for this webcast – and more webcasts to come - is consumerism. We're going to do this today with the help of our special guest. Mark you're a business journalist for the BBC World Service, so we're going to be picking your brains throughout the programme, including helping us understand business language terms. So here's the first: consumerism – what is it?

Mark: (defines consumerism)

Jackie: All our programmes over this month will have a business English slant and consumerism will be an important part of that. We'll be looking at how different countries are affected by consumerism – this week starting with Japan which has the world's second biggest economy and a reputation as one of the most consumer-driven places on earth.

Japanese views

Jackie: The views of some Japanese people on consumerism in their country. They see Japan as very much a consumer society. A consumer society – what is that exactly? Dave McCaughan is the Director Strategic of Planning in the Japan office of advertising agency McCaan-Erickson. How does he describe consumer societies? Listen closely and we'll look at some of the language that comes up afterwards.

Dave

It's about buying and the ability to buy stuff just because I want to do it. Consumer societies are societies where people have the luxury of being able to just buy stuff because they want to buy it. They may **rationalize** it to themselves and of course **branding** and **retailing** and **advertising**. A lot of it is all about 'Look, we understand you're really driven by the emotion, but we'll give you a **rational halo** around that...so this is the brand that is used by the superstars, this is the most efficient engine, this is the drink that will revive you the most so they want all that sort of stuff.

Jackie: So consumer societies are societies where people are able to buy things just because they want them, not because they need them. Dave talked about people rationalizing the things they buy – what does this mean?

Jo Well to rationalize means to think of reasons why you do something and in this case making excuses for why you have bought something. You might say: 'I

just HAD to buy some brown shoes because all my shoes are black and brown looks better with some of my clothes' – which in reality means, your black shoes are fine – you just bought the brown shoes because it made you feel better – you didn't really need them!

Jackie: So people rationalize the money they spend on things, but they also get some help doing this.

Jo: Yes, David talked about branding, retailing and advertising. A 'brand' is usually a well-known name of the manufacturer, the maker of certain goods – Coca Cola, Nike, Sony are all international brands that we might recognise. 'Retailing' is basically selling things to the public and 'advertising' is telling people about your products in perhaps the newspapers or on television to encourage people to buy them.

Jackie: Retailers use advertising to give you what Dave called a rational halo, they give you reasons why it's good to spend the money you're spending through advertising. Well, let's listen to that clip of Dave again as there was some quite difficult language in there. Listen out for the words we looked at.

Dave

It's about buying and the ability to buy stuff just because I want to do it. Consumer societies are societies where people have the luxury of being able to just buy stuff because they want to buy it. They may **rationalize** it to themselves and of course **branding** and **retailing** and **advertising** a lot of it is all about 'Look, we understand you're really driven by the emotion, but we'll give you a **rational halo** around that...so this is the brand that is used by the superstars, this is the most efficient engine, this is the drink that will revive you the most so they want all that sort of stuff.

Jackie: So that's what a consumerist society is. We'll return to Japan in a moment, but first, let's hear from the streets of London. Do people here think Britain is a consumerist society?

4 consumerism vox pops 45"

Absolutely

Very much so – too much so

Absolutely – we're obsessed with it

Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

A bad thing – because there are more valuable things in life than material things

Bad probably – 'cos for people that can't afford to go out shopping and get things that they like – it's probably intimidating for them to go down the high street.

I do think it's very bad yeah, too much materialism – it's all about that they can have, what they can buy, how much money they've got – that's not life.

There's such an awful lot of debt I do think people are spending too much that they haven't got...

Jackie: Well, everyone seemed to agree the UK is a consumer driven society. Mark Gregory, do you think they're right?

Mark: (responds)

Jackie: So Jo some helpful language in those interviews we heard?

Jo: Yes, let's look at the adjective – 'material'. Material is often a noun that explains what something is made of – what material is it – cloth? Leather etc. However the adjective is used to talk about things, possessions rather than

emotional things – and materialism is a noun and it means that having money or possessions is very important.

Jackie: Ok let's hear some more of the interviews you did.

Interviews

When you go shopping in the high street is there enough variety of things to buy do you think?

I think there's too much choice to be honest – I think a lot of shops are replicating exactly the same things and you notice that as you go around – the only difference is the price really. I find the shopping centres a bit samey – the same shops everywhere – I do like to try and find places that have maybe got individual shops – rather than just the chains. There's perhaps too much variety which is part of the problem.

Does buying things make you happy?

Yeah if I'm buying for myself!

I do like shopping – I am a bit of a shopaholic

It's just nice now and again to come out and buy something and feel good about buying something

Jo: Well there we heard about shops on 'the high street' – which is the main shopping street – and in particular chain stores or chains – these are well known shops that have lots of different stores in lots of towns.

One woman said these stores were 'samey' – basically all the same and a lot of them are replicating the same things – to 'replicate' means to copy – to do something in the same way.

Jackie: Mark, in recent years that has become an increasingly common complaint in the UK hasn't it – high streets from one town to the next all look very similar and are dominated by large chains.

Mark: (responds)

Jackie: Do you think this is something happening across the World?

Mark: (responds)

Jackie: Jo, any more expressions that came up?

Yes, just a couple of other good consumer words – debt – which is when you owe money to someone that's a debt. We'll be looking more at debt in next week's programme.

And a shopaholic is someone who is addicted to shopping – they can't stop themselves from shopping, they need to do it!

Jackie: And you asked these people also said shopping made them happy, which brings us towards another interesting area related to consumerism, which we call 'retail therapy'. Mark, what's all that about?

Mark: (responds)

Jackie: Does retail therapy play a major role in the economy?

Mark: (responds)

END OF PART ONE

Jackie: You're listening to Talk About English with BBC Learning English with me Jackie Dalton, Jo Reffin and our guest today, BBC business journalist Mark Gregory.

Jo: We're talking about consumerism, with a special focus this week on Japan. Next week we'll be looking at Botswana.

Jackie: At the beginning of the programme we heard from some Japanese people describing how they think their country is very consumer-driven.

Next we'll hear from Mariko Fujiwara from the Hakka Hodo Institute of Life and Living, which analyses consumer trends for Japan's second biggest advertising agency. She says brands, which as we mentioned before are big name labels, like Pepsi or McDonalds, play an incredibly powerful role in Japan.

Mariko Fujiwara

Japan is the only country in the world where people buy automobiles without test driving. Imagine that, you know, it is a country where, on the basis of their trust in brand, people buy products.

Jackie: Mariko says people in her country will buy cars without even test driving them, without driving them at all, to see if they like them before they buy, just because they trust the brand so much. Mark, do you think there are some parts of the world where branding clearly has a much stronger hold than others?

Mark: (responds)

Jackie: Well Rikiko Endo works for the Italian brand Todds in Tokyo. She also certainly feels that owning things with brand labels is very important in Japan. As you listen to her, try to answer this question:

Jo: Does Rikiko think *absolutely everyone* wants to have brand label products?

Rikiko Endo

We are very vain I think. We have more magazines, more fashion magazines I'm talking about, you don't see much of the culture – it's a very, very sad country. And these magazines - they talk so much about these brands and they get brainwashed.

You almost feel inhuman if you are not carrying one of those bags from Louis Vuitton or Gucci, or something, you know, but there are some very very, very few, like my daughter, she would never carry anything with any brands and she's very proud of being this way, to the point that she stopped university she left this country, she couldn't stand it anymore

Jackie: Well Rikiko said people feel inhuman – like they are not proper people – if they're not carrying bags by one of the big brands. But what was the answer to your question Jo?

Jo: Well she did also say that there is a small number of people, including her daughter, who reject the idea and don't want to walk around with these kinds of things.

END OF PART TWO

Madonna – Material Girl

Jo: You're listening to Talk About English, with me, Jo Reffin, Jackie Dalton and our special guest Mark Gregory, business journalist from the BBC World Service. We're talking about consumerism and, as Madonna puts it, living in a material world.

Candy and Wu Hanjun from China on the phone

In: Well we've heard from...

Out: ...Thank you very much for your time

Jackie: So keep sending us *your* views on consumerism and how it affects your country – let us know if you disagree with what you've heard – details of how to get in touch on the website. So two different perspectives from China there Wu Han Jun saying material things aren't very important for him, Candy reminding us that spending money helps economic growth – which is a pretty important point, isn't it Mark, people often talk of consumerism as a bad thing, but ultimately, it plays a pretty important role in economic growth?

Mark: (responds)

Sala from Iraq on the phone

Jo: Well some more interesting views on consumerism from one of our listeners there.

Jackie: Now we're going to hear from another person who rejects this idea of a consumer driven society. Gabi Hadl lives in Japan and is the coordinator of an event called Buy Nothing Day.

Gabi Hadl

Buy Nothing Day is an event that started in Canada some 11 years ago and it's a day to not shop and try to think of other better more creative things to do with your time.

Jo: So the idea of a Buy Nothing Day is a kind of protest against consumer driven societies and to make people think that we don't always need to buy things all the time. It happens all around the world every year.

Gabi Hadl

Buy Nothing Day is good as you spend a day without shopping all by yourself and you sit around and it's a great experience to do something consciously like that to not use money for a day.

Jackie: To do something consciously – to do something and think about why you're doing it. Mark, this is evidence of a kind of backlash against consumer culture, do you think there is quite a strong movement against consumerism?

Mark: (responds)

Jackie: Well it's time for details of the latest competition and this month we're going to do something a little different. This competition is going to run for the whole of August – and we are giving away not one but TWO BBC Learning English MP3 players as prizes – quite appropriate for our topic of consumerism.

Jo: Yes and to win one of these great prizes we would like you to write a short report for us – say 150-200 words on attitudes to consumerism in your country.

Jackie: Think about the language you've heard today that you can include in your report. We want to know if your country is consumer driven. Now we do have

an expert business journalist with us on the programme today – Mark – can you give our listeners any simple tips on writing a business report?

Mark: (Mark gives a couple of tips).

Jo: Thanks Mark. You'll be able to find out more details on our website shortly, including vocabulary that might help you.

Jackie: Well that's all for this week. Do join us next week when we'll be discussing Botswana, consumerism and debt.

Mark Gregory will also be answering some of the business questions you've sent in – like what is inflation, what's the NASDAQ?

Jo: So keep sending your business questions to talkaboutenglish@bbc.co.uk.

Jackie: Now over to Yvonne to talk about branding and a new museum in London.

Yvonne: Now whatever we think of advertising and branding or about the effect that it has on shoppers, we've got to admit that it's clever - and it's big business! But why does it work? You're listening to bbclearningenglish.com – I'm Yvonne Archer. Welcome to London Life!

Why are we convinced that we'll look and feel like the happy model in the advert if we buy that new shampoo? And look, the bottle's so pretty! Of course, we know what the advertisers are doing – but we still reach for our wallets. Why? We left London's busy shoppers for The Museum of Brands, Packaging and Advertising to find some answers. The museum's director, Robert Opie, has been collecting brands and packaging for the last 30 years so he was happy to tell us how it all began. As you listen, try to catch the three

types of products that Robert mentions; they were sent to the ‘grocers’, the individual shop keepers, ‘in bulk’. What does Robert mean by ‘in bulk’?

Robert Opie, Director, Museum of Brands, Packaging and Advertising

Well if you go back to say the middle of the 19th century, virtually all the products being produced at that time were sent to the grocer in bulk. And he would make up and blend his own specific teas or he would dole out the dried fruits or the sugar or whatever it was. And it would be prepared in front of you and you could see what the product was.

Yvonne: Up until around 1850, the middle of the 19th century, the products that grocers sold were sent to them ‘in bulk’. Did you work out what that means? Yes, things like tea, dried fruit and sugar - the three products we were listening out for - were sent to them in large amounts or quantities, often in large sacks. So shoppers could see what they were getting when they paid for a pound in weight of tea, for example.

Now as we know, packaging is bad for our environment and makes shopping more expensive. So can't we go back to our old ways and why the big change?

Robert Opie, Director, Museum of Brands, Packaging and Advertising

Come the packaging revolution, that all disappeared and why was that? Well, people were getting a bit wary about what the grocer was putting into his tea and so on. He was making up weights of that pound that you ordered with little bits of spurious... hmm, perhaps the sawdust from the floor even!

Yvonne: Yuck – sawdust?! That's certainly ‘spurious’ - shavings of wood instead of pure tea?! It was the dishonest grocer who brought on the packaging revolution. Of course, the people who made the products – the ‘manufacturers’ - soon realised that packaging could mean new publicity opportunities, as Robert puts it ‘a whole new publicity angle’. And customers got a few extras too! Listen

out for two examples – the soap package that Robert talks about is from the 1880s...

Robert Opie, Director, Museum of Brands, Packaging and Advertising

Once the manufacturer had control over his product, he could put recipes on, he could say this is the same quality as the time before. So the whole thing took on a whole new meaning and a whole new publicity angle...

I'm looking here at a Sunlight Soap package – a brand that went right around the world.

And the great way that they attracted customers to this was they offered a £1,000 reward if you could find anything wrong with the product. I mean that was a huge enticement.

Yvonne: OK, free recipes are quite useful but the soap product wins hands down for me! No wonder it was so 'enticing' – tempting people worldwide. Imagine how many people kept on buying packages of that soap to try to find a bar that wasn't perfect! After all, a thousand pounds in the 1880s would have been a huge amount of money and it still is today.

Of course, branding and packaging is still about selling products but it's also about another sales message that will keep on changing...

Robert Opie, Director, Museum of Brands, Packaging and Advertising

If you buy my brand, you become a hip kinda, cool kinda person. That's the kind of person you want to be. And of course, that'll continually change as our perception and our ideals change as society changes.

Yvonne: Can buying the latest product really make people and even children feel better about themselves? And is it OK to try to make us believe that? Why not talk about it in English before our next London Life? And visit us at bbclearningenglish.com for some of the words you could make use of.

Jackie: From all of us in the studio, it's goodbye!