ABSTRACT. The relevance of consumer behavior to social differentiation is considered and its independence from income is documented. Earlier studies of household consumer traits by Sewell and others are taken as baseline data and compared to the 1966 Detroit Area Study. In the baseline data, published between 1925 and 1940, high correlations were observed among consumer traits. The 1966 study revealed weaker relationships among similar traits. Taking correlations and factor loadings as social indicators, material life styles appear to have become more differentiated. After assessing the robustness and relevance of this inference, the author discusses how trends in material life styles may run counter to other social trends.

1. CONSUMER BEHAVIOR AS AN INDEPENDENT DIMENSION IN THE SOCIAL SYSTEM

Various researchers have called attention to the neglect of consumer behavior as a significant area of sociological investigation (Glock and Nicosia, 1964; Foxall, 1974; Mayer, 1975). Although there are important exceptions to this neglect (see review in Felson, 1973), nonetheless, consumption deserves additional attention from sociologists, especially since some major social analysts have focused on its role in communicating social inequality (see, for example, Simmel, 1957; Veblen, 1899). Indeed, styles of life were emphasized by Weber (1968: 926–940) as a key factor in the very definition of social status.

Like racial characteristics and language, material consumption offers a practical way of communicating social distinctions in everyday life. Although material status symbols of many types may communicate social differentiation at many levels of society, in small groups or among total strangers, the current paper will not span this field of inquiry. Rather, the author concentrates on communication to friends and acquaintances of one's position in larger society via material consumption. After discussing the relationship of material consumption to other stratification variables, the degree of differentiation in material life styles is taken as an important and visible aspect of differentiation in social life in general. Social indicators of the degree of
differentiation in material life styles are then derived from data collected in Detroit in 1966 and in various studies as early as 1925.

One way in which people communicate their social position is by directly telling other people their education or occupation or letting them indirectly find out. However, it is generally impolite to tell others one's income or for them to ask. Thus income must be guessed after considering occupation, consumer behavior or other cues. Yet the correlation between income and either dollars consumed in a year (see Katona, 1949; Working, 1943) or consumption of particular categories of goods and services (see Friend and Jones, 1960) is not consistently high (see review articles by Ferber, 1972, 1962, for further references). Segal and Felson (1973) explicitly attempted to create an index of conspicuous consumption, yet were surprised that this index was relatively poorly correlated with income. Economists have not only found that income elasticities are often low (i.e. that the correlation between income and particular consumer items is small), but also that the relationship between income and consumption is often loglinear, since the marginal propensity to consume declines as income rises (see Friend and Jones, 1960). Even automobile consumption is not so accurately predicted from income as one might think (Peters, 1968). The author does not pretend that small correlations (e.g. between 0 and 0.4) are unimportant, but they indicate that income alone cannot fully explain consumption patterns. Moreover, addition of education and occupation as explanatory variables adds but marginally to the ability to explain many consumer traits (Felson, 1973: IX). Of course, these generalizations are well known among micro-economists, market researchers and sociologists familiar with their literature. Yet it is worthwhile to refer to this evidence since it tends to justify treatment of consumption as an independent dimension of the social system. By independent, I do not mean to imply that it is unrelated to social stratification, but merely to suggest that this relationship is not automatic and remains an empirical question.

Clearly, this research is influenced by Thorstein Veblen's (1899) notion of conspicuous consumption, but the term 'visible consumption' is used here to avoid the implication that consumption in households necessarily implies deliberate attempts to be conspicuous in communicating invidious distinctions. The latter is itself a matter of some debate and one about which Veblen himself was ambivalent. However, Veblen's assumption that visible consumer traits serve as an important mode of communication of social differences