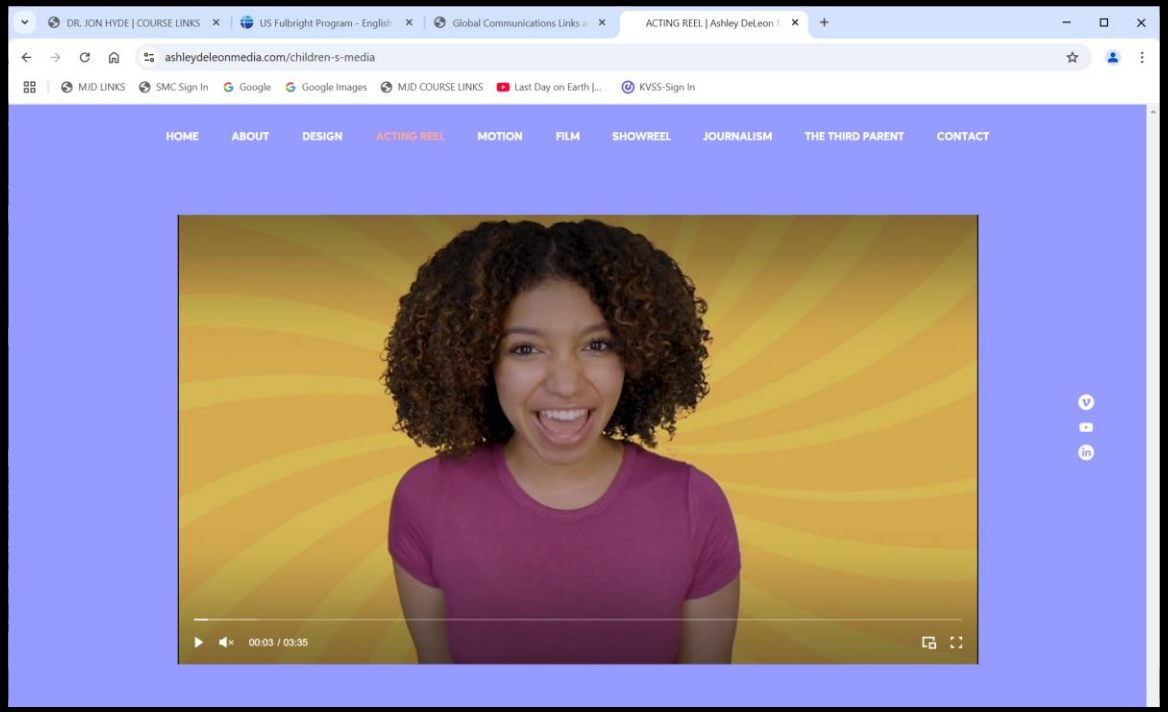
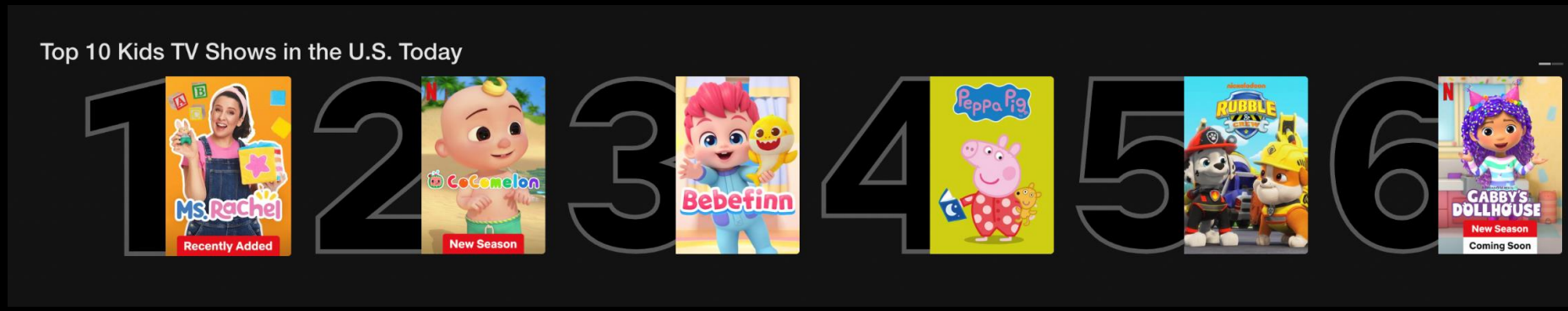
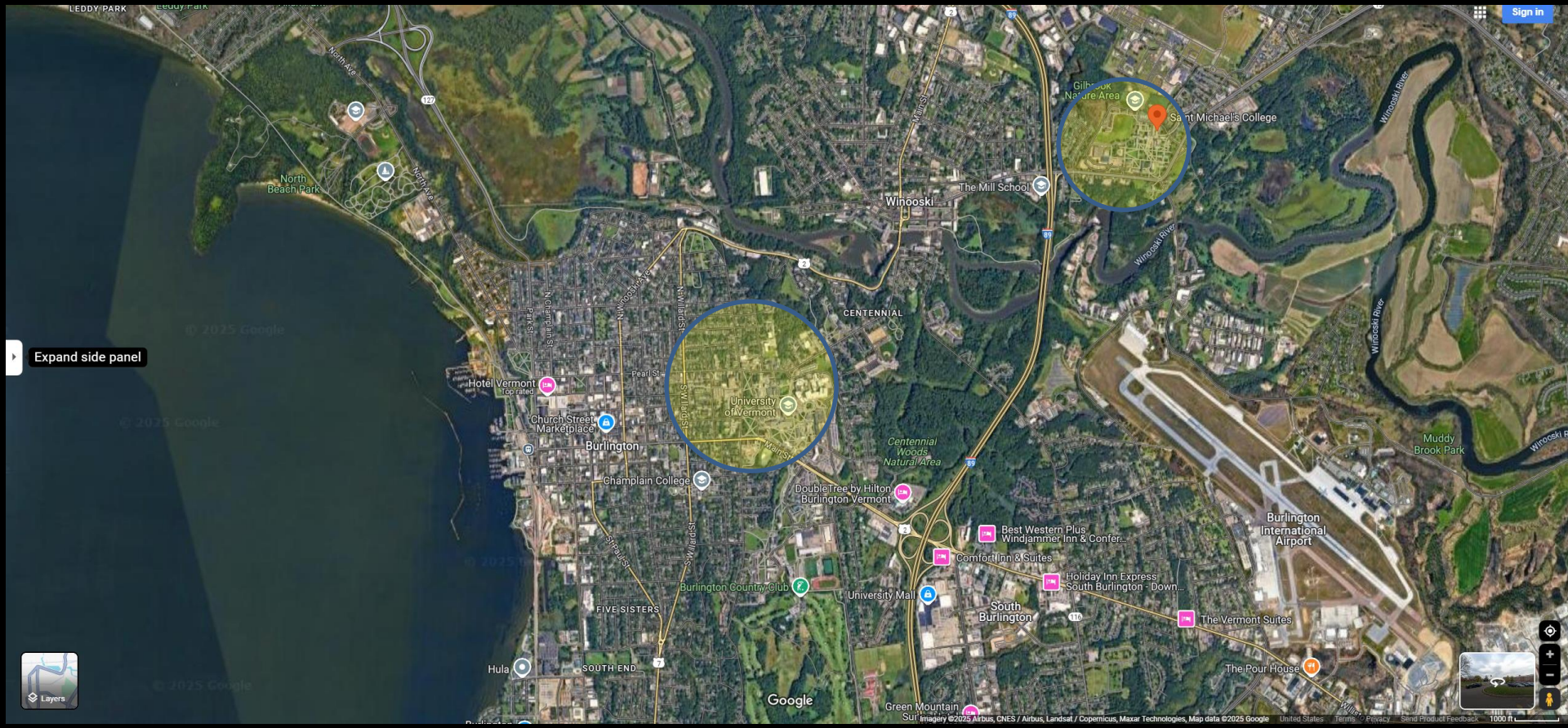
Myths, Global Symbols and SOFT POWER Semiotics

Roland Barthes and Structuralism as a Tool for Understanding Global Culture

Ashley DeLeon goes to Netflix #1






LEDDY PARK
Leddy Park
North Ave
127
North Beach Park
Winooski
The Mill School
Saint Michael's College
Main St
Winooski River
CENTENNIAL
Pearl St
Hotel Vermont
Top rated
Church Street Marketplace
Burlington
University of Vermont
Centennial Woods Natural Area
Champlain College
DoubleTree by Hilton Burlington Vermont
Best Western Plus Windjammer Inn & Confer...
Comfort Inn & Suites
Holiday Inn Express South Burlington - Down...
Burlington Country Club
University Mall
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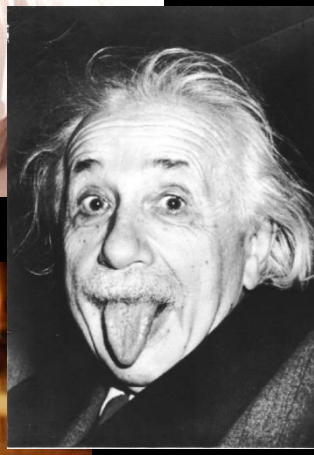
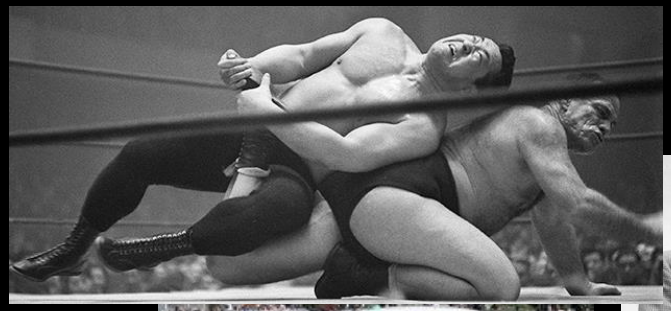
Roland Barthes→ Mythologies (1915-1980)

- French literary theorist, philosopher, linguist, critic, and semiotician. Post-WWII Paris France.
- 1950s: Series of essays in the magazine *Les Lettres Nouvelles* → Barthes began decoding myths, icons, trends of popular mainstream culture.
  - Influenced by linguists: Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss (creators of the disciplines of Linguistics and Semiotics)
  - Influenced by the vitalité and MASSIVE growth of French/Parisien/European CAFE CULTURE and post-WW2 (1945) FASHION.
  - "POP-CULTURE" becomes a more serious literary and academic concept worthy of sociological and psychological study (later business/marketing…politics, economics, etc.)
- Book: Mythologies (1957) published a full collection of his essays on popular iconic culture. Translated worldwide.
  - Barthes examines "the tendency of contemporary social value systems to fabricate/create modern myths about itself and its people and the important prioritized cultural values.
  - Barthes looks at the process of myth creation→and the people or organizations that are involved.
  - VT connection: 1957 Barthes visits the U.S. and teaches at Middlebury College.

Roland Barthes: 2nd-→3rd Level Semiotics

- 2nd Level Semiotics → Personal Associations + Media Technical Strategies (photo, color, graphic, perceptual, etc.) to invoke a set of responses in you.
- 3rd Level Semiotics → Culture-wide and Cross-Cultural Associations even on an international/GLOBAL SCALE
- The people, objects, organizations, designs who are ELEVATED to the level of mainstream symbolic ICONS or MYTHIC figures through media and cultural repetition.
- Cultural "GODS" – celebrity and "well-known-ness"
- Roland Barthe's takes a stab at this (as do others) using Café Society in Paris + American/Hollywood Culture
- Semiotic ICON/Myth analysis is a key foundation of cultural studies and STRUCTURALISM (sociology, anthro, social sciences).
  - Structuralism. Every social system has a structured order of signs/symbols which we use to derive individual identities, meaning and relationships.
  - Cultural Niches or sub-cultures | MARKETING | FASHION
  - Agenda Setting POWER. Whoever controls "meaning-making" structures or "norming" processes also tends has true POWER in our society. SYMBOLIC→economic →political POWER



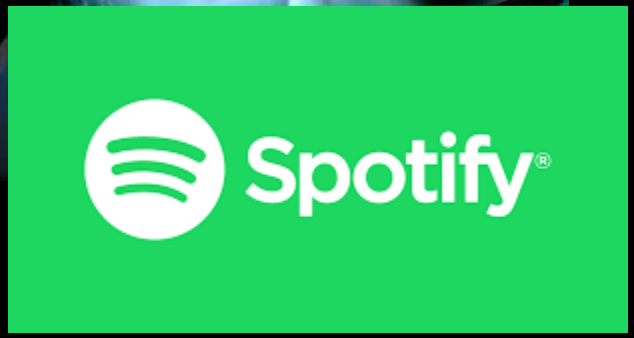


The RISE of SOFT POWER: Global Currency

1950s-60s: The Culture Industries ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

- **HARD POWER =** Military, Police, Political-Economic FORCE, (Laws, Tariffs/Taxes, Courts, Governments, etc.)
- **SOFT POWER =** MEDIA products and services. Education.Tourism. "Culture." Areas associated with ENTERTAINMENT and Leisure.

1. RAPID RISE of Mass Media and The "CULTURE INDUSTRIES" →
   - Music
   - Fashion
   - Celebrity
   - Fads/Trends
   - Popular books/fiction
   - Magazines
   - Movies
   - Sports
   - Video Games
   - Food



2. MEDIA STUDIES as an INTERDISCIPLINARY SOCIAL SCIENCE DISCIPLINE (both the Technologies AND Techniques) Anthro, Soc, Bus, Econ, Psych, Health, Environment

3. MEDIA RESEARCH: AUDIENCE Behaviors, Trends, Enculturation, Education, and Identities (Mass and individuals)

4. The "ENGINEERING" of people, behaviors, markets &POPULAR CULTURE

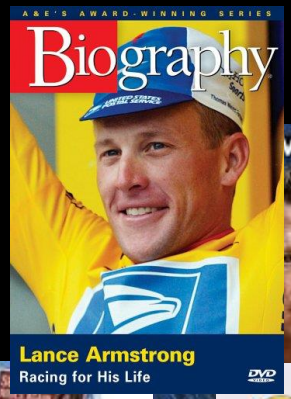
2024 Celebrity POWER (Social, Political, Economic, “Spiritual”)

Poltical & Economic Power: Can you name thse people?

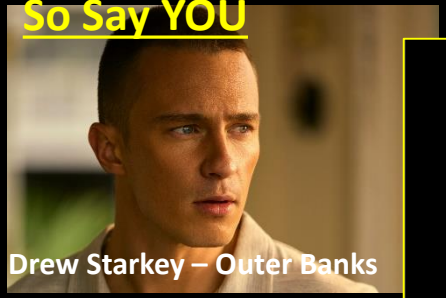
Global Transnational Corporate Logos

Manufacturing/Engineering Iconic Figures

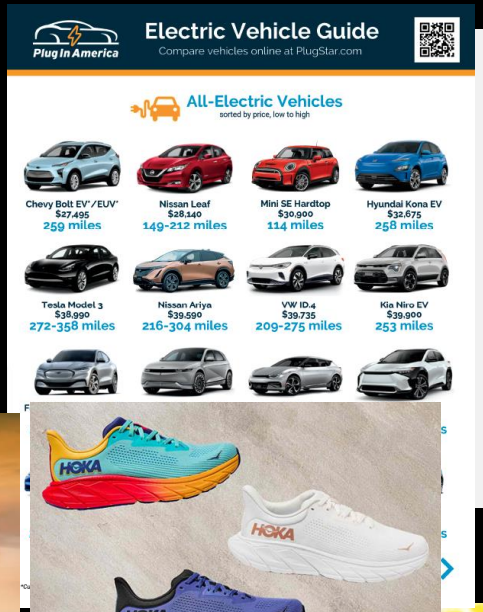
- The MEDIA engineering of Lance Armstrong
- Media scaffolding
- Media mgt.



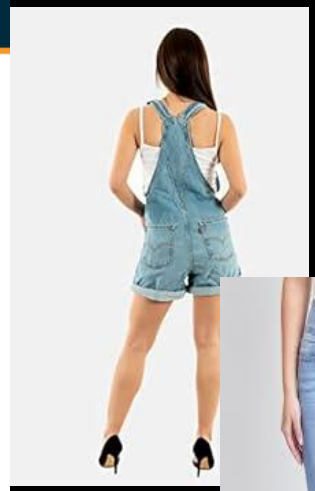
2025 Survey Results – The "In-Hip" So Say YOU

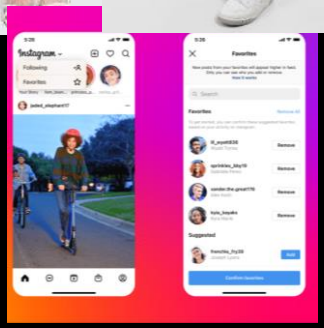


TikTok



Hello Kitty



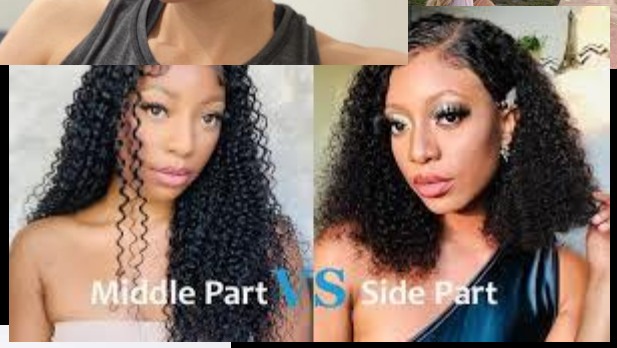


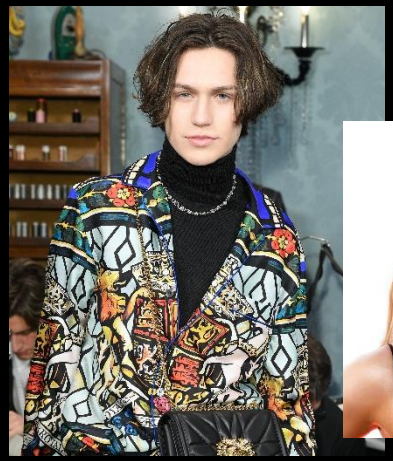
2025 – The "OUT" So Say YOU

TikTok

Uber Eats

FADS YOU FELL FOR





2025 – The “TRANSCENDENT” So Say YOU

TikTok

When does the SOFT POWER "engineering" of icons, stories, and practices turn into cultural imperialism?

- **Definition of Cultural Imperialism:**
  - The imposition by one usually politically or economically dominant community of various aspects of its own culture onto another, nondominant community. It is a form of imperialism in that the imposing community forcefully extends the authority of its "way of life" or mainstream norms over the other population by either transforming or replacing aspects of the nondominant community's culture.

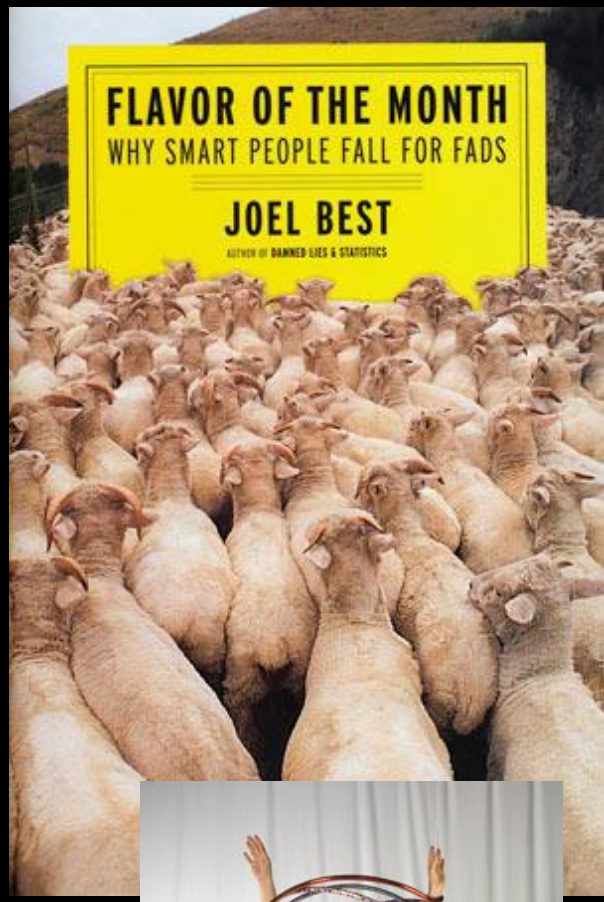
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NQMp-0tU7qk

Myanmar: Copy Stars

Joel Best

Flavor of the Month: Why Smart People Fall for Fads

- Baseline Questions:
  - FADS-FASHIONS-TRENDS-CULT FOLLOWINGS: WHAT ARE THEY REALLY?
  - How are they formed and/or initiated and then sustained (if they are)?
    - How do things become COOL/Popular/CULT LEVEL STATUS?
  - How DO THEY FUNCTION (both PREDICTABLY and systematically)?
  - Who is in "CONTROL"? Corporations? Media? You?
  - What are the actual roles of CONSUMERS/AUDIENCES?
    - Role of the People's own desires vs. Media, technology, corporate cycles of GLOBAL MASS production?
    - Connection to childhood, identity, and family life?
    - Connection to History? NOSTALGIA?
    - Connections to global FLOWS?
  - ARE WE BOUND by a Conditioned Cultural Consumer Life?

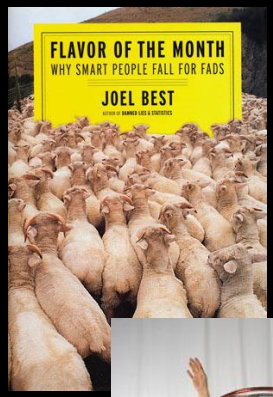


Misconceptions about Fads

- ☑ Too easily dismissed as "trivial" or "non-essential" OR just passing…
- ☑ Fads have a strong association with entertainment/fashion cultures, BUT THERE'S MORE!
- ☑ "INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES"
- ☑ Fads have a strong association with TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS, BUT THERE'S MORE!.
- ☑ Strong associations with Education and Schooling
- ☑ Strong association with youth and "youth cultures" or a specifically susceptible age/stage/demographic
- ☑ Newness → Novelty → vive la différence
  - ☑ Rapid rise in popularity (VIRAL NATURE)
  - ☑ Equally rapid fall in popularity

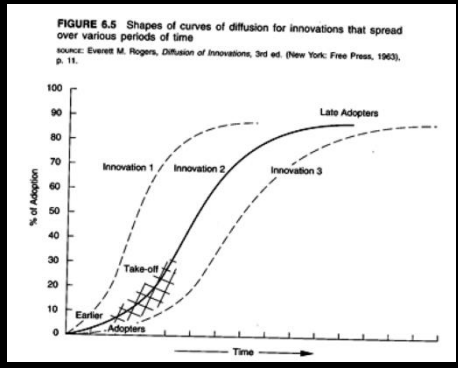
JOEL BEST'S "TAKE HOME" ARGS

Flavor of the Month: Why Smart People Fall for Fads



- **Fads, Fashions are a central part of our social, cultural and consumption lives as humans.**
  - Yes, they are Episodic – RECYCLED FASCINATOINS and short-lived-seasonal fandoms.
  - Fads and Fashions are a CENTRAL form of CULTURAL CONDITIONING!
- **In terms of MEDIA and Global CORP CONSUMPTION, FADS are extremely SYSTEMATIC and HIGHLY calculated in their occurrence AND central to our Culture Industries.**
  - **In 2022 worldwide toy market sales topped $110 billion** (U.S.)
  - **$350-700 avg amount spent on toys per child per year.**
- **They DEFINE YOUTH/CHILDHOOD, IDENTITY, EDUCATIONS and FAMILY!**
  - **NARRATIVE FRAMING (our memories and our) imaginations**
- **THEY help FORM our CULTURAL LIVES with or without our active participation. Our lives are consciously and unconsciously conditioned by these fads**

Fads vs. Innovation vs. Fashion



Fashions

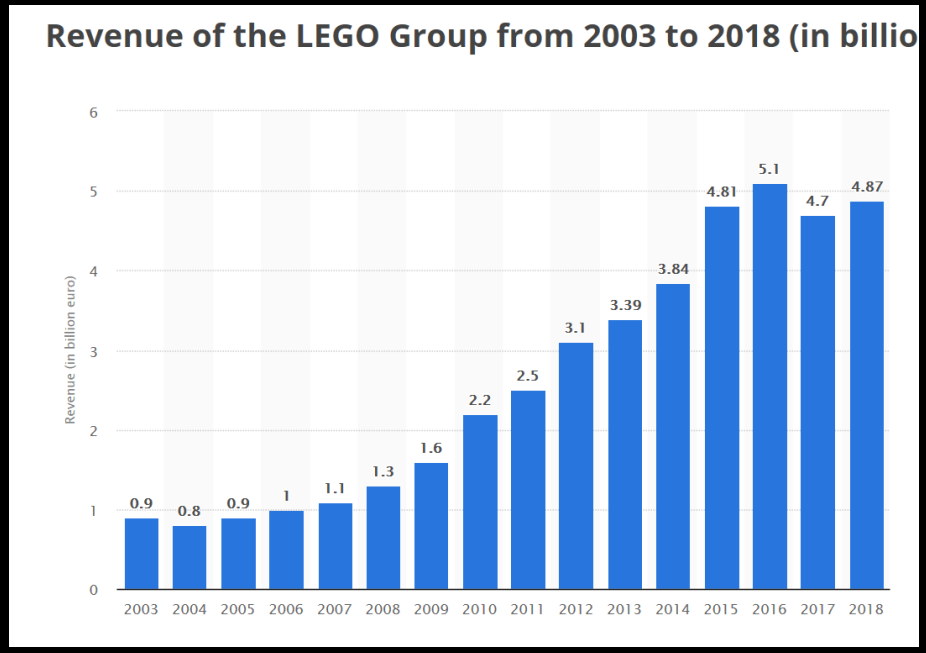
- Unpredictable but cyclical
- "Regularized Transience"

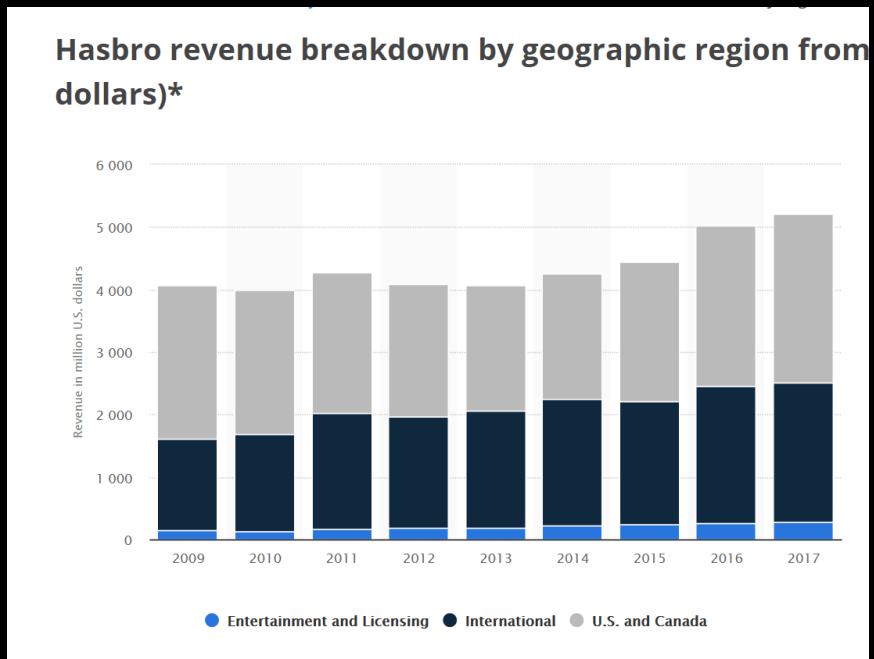
- "High Society" or High Culture
- Trickle Up/Down/Sideways
- Economic Hierarchy/Tier system of Fashion (Georg Simmel (German Sociologist)

- **Innovations**
  - S-curve diffusion
  - New invention or service
  - Built upon/improved
  - Tend to be enduring
  - Become a more permanent "fixture" in a culture

Top Toy Companies Worldwide

- 1) LEGO A/S
- 2) Bandai Namco (Japanese)
- 3) Fisher-Price
- 4) Barbie
- 5) Nerf
- 6) Mattel
- 7) Mobile Suit Gundam (Japanese)
- 8) Hot Wheels





Top Selling Toys 2025

1. Wowee Fingerling Hugs
2. Hatchimals surprise pets
3. Let’s Dance Elmo
4. Imaginext Jurassic World Jurassic Rex—
5. Harry Potter Hogwarts Great Hall LEGO Building Kit—
6. Barbie DreamHouse—
7. Really Rad Robots Mibro R/C Robot—

IMPLICATIONS for GLOBAL Media?

1. Fads – Fashions –Innovations – Technology Diffusion are all at the heart of SCREEN and visual media production
    1. Visual media are needed to "sell" any new fad, fashion, innovation
    2. Visual media are also themselves fads, fashions
2. Popular Culture (i.e., all media) CONSUMES the "new," the "fringe," and the "counter-culture." THEN, the media repackages the ideas/sentiments from those areas and sends them back to us for our mass consumption.
3. Human Costs
    1. Independence?
    2. Individuality?
    3. An "image" life
4. Ethical/Moral/Intellectual Co
    1. Authenticity
    2. Truth
    3. Proof

twitter