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From Necessity to Obsession: The Evolution and Impact of Desire-Driven Societies and Consumerism

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ABSTRACT

Consumption has evolved into the foundation for survival and success within the framework of our capitalist society. Understanding its profound significance is imperative due to its pervasive influence on our lives. This research explores why society drives towards consumption, examining the push toward material possessions by investigating human behavior, societal structures, self-alienation, and the evolution of consumer culture. Firstly it introduces the history of consumerism delving into philosophical underpinnings from Aristotle and ancient Stoics, followed by an examination of economist Victor Lebow's ideology, wherein consumption becomes vital for economic growth. Furthermore, a significant focus is dedicated to Jean Baudrillar's theories, particularly his concept of "the code", where consumer behavior represents social status, alongside concepts like "the simulation," hyper-consumerism, and the production of desires. It also analyzes how hyper-consumerism shapes identity formation, discussing the social coding of desires and consumption as a surrogate for fulfillment. Karl Marx's perspective on consumption as a distraction from labor-induced alienation is explored, highlighting how people seek solace in consumption rather than confronting their disconnected realities. Ultimately, the essay examines how the fleeting satisfaction from material possessions perpetuates a cycle of discontentment, exacerbating alienation and reliance on goods. It concludes that the urge to consume derives from the combination various factors engraved in modern society, particularly those molded by the persistent sense of alienation and societal pressures, where the quest for self-fulfillment intertwines with social influences, fostering an addictive cycle of pursuing fleeting happiness through material consumption.

The History of Consumerism

Throughout history, human existence has revolved around consumption. From the earliest ages, even devoid of the construct of money forms, bartering and trade sustained livelihoods. As economic interaction expanded, it eventually ushered the dominance of monetary value in societal norms; however, the essence of consumerism has undergone an enormous transformation over time. In the philosophies of figures like Aristotle, wealth should be considered esteemed when directed towards communal prosperity rather than mere opulence, which he deemed morally questionable without societal utility (Our Consumer Society, 2021). His ideology, denouncing luxury as a breeding ground for indolence and corruption, highlighted its detrimental impact on the individual and society. Similarly, ancient Stoics refrained from attachment to transient material possessions, foreseeing the disillusionment and frustrations such attachments would inevitably bring to one's self (Higgs, The Origins of our Thirst for Stuff, 2021). These beliefs stand in eminent contrast to contemporary societal norms, where consumption and attachment to material possessions are often encouraged, illustrating an extensive and radical departure from such historical ideals.

The conclusion of World War II served as a pivotal moment for the surge of consumerism within modern American society. Post-war, the specter of famine and scarcity was largely dispelled in the industrialized world, allowing for a shift in focus from needs to desires (Putten, 2023). Victor Lebow, a retail analyst, encapsulated this shift by emphasizing the necessity of consumption as the cornerstone of economic growth (Higgs, A Brief History of Consumer Culture, 2023). Consumption, according to Lebow, was to become a ritual, a source of spiritual and ego satisfaction.

The 1920s set the stage for robust economic expansion, a trend that gained momentum after the war. Mass production, which played a vital role in revitalizing the American economy post-Depression, as well as the rise of globalization further propelled consumerism by demanding better infrastructure. Those included, for instance, the rapid expansion of all-weather roads, which facilitated the movement of goods; the advent of radio and its commercial networks, breaking down rural isolation, furthermore amplifying the role of media and marketing in shaping desires; and also the rise of the recreational industry such as travel, cinema, and professional sports, offering people opportunities for enjoyment while contributing significantly to higher employment rates.

"The good purchaser devoted to 'more, newer and better' was the good citizen," historian Lizabeth Cohen explained, "since economic recovery after a decade and a half of depression and war depended on a dynamic mass consumption economy." Indeed, embracing the consumerism culture was not only encouraged but also celebrated as a mark of a good citizen; in a way consumer spending became synonymous with patriotism, lauding the American consumer as a vital contributor to the nation's success (The Rise of American Consumerism, n.d). This era underscored a transition where consumerism wasn't merely about fulfilling materialistic desires but was heralded as a fundamental aspect of the American way of life.

Jean Baudrillard's "Code"

Consumerism, according to dictionary definitions, represents a societal and economic framework wherein individuals aspire to acquire goods and services surpassing basic survival or traditional status symbols. In contrast to historic consumption patterns previously mentioned, contemporary human behavior transcends mere necessity, emphasizing a yearning for novelty. Over time, the "use" value of items—such as food, essential for sustenance, or a candle, for illumination in darkness—has shifted towards "exchange" value. This concept denotes a preference for an item's monetary worth rather than its utility, effectively masking the societal labor invested in its creation (Baudrillard, The Consumer Society, 1970). Take, for instance, the case of a purse: an ostensibly simple object whose value escalates disproportionately, with some priced at over $40,000. They are predominantly consumed within our consumerist society not solely for its functionality, but as a symbol of status (Gdula & Beilharz, 2017). This transition uncovers a third facet of value: "sign" value. Jean Baudrillard, a renowned French sociologist and philosopher known for dissecting media, contemporary culture, and technological communication, contends that "we don't value things by how useful they are, or by how much it costs, but how much it signifies to others socially (Our Consumer Society, 2022)." This assertion underscores our unconscious communication through logos, highlighting our inclination to prioritize societal perceptions over objective realities.

Baudrillard's theory of "the code" fundamentally challenges the conventional notion of reality by proposing that life itself becomes subservient to a system of categories, and to the objects derived from these categories. This code, according to Baudrillard, doesn't reflect genuine reality but rather imposes a particular representation system upon existence. Unlike earlier ideas, Baudrillard extends this concept to encompass all aspects of social life (Baudrillard, The Consumer Society). The repetitive message inherent in our consumption patterns and actions isn't haphazard; it aligns with "the code." It dictates that desires must conform, fit into a constructed societal fantasy, creating social value based on one's foremost acceptance within society. Our desires, therefore, are socially coded, influenced by our interdependence on others, shaping our thought processes.

Moreover, Baudrillard asserts that capitalism has reached a stage of self-completion where the distinction between genuine needs and artificial desires are blurred (Baudrillard, The Consumer Society). We've become programmed to depend on consumerism, driven not just to conform but to excel within society's established model, aspiring not merely to fit in, but to surpass others within it.

An evident illustration of Baudrillard's "code" in one's day to day lives, is the representation of fashion trends, a realm where styles rapidly ascend in our society, only to swiftly lose their value, replaced by successive iterations in an unending sequence (Our Consumer Society, 2022). Economist Harvey Leibenstein adapted the concept of conspicuous consumption, highlighting how the affluent not only adopt novel fashions to differentiate themselves and stand out from lower social classes, but also how the middle classes strive to emulate them (McCormick, 2023). This mimicry stems from a desire to thrive and be recognized within society, mirroring those who appear to do so successfully .

This inclination gave rise to what is known as the Bandwagon effect: once the lower classes adopt a new trend, it no longer maintains its exclusivity, or its distinguishing power among the elite (Kelly, n.d.). Consequently, these trends lose their value and are swiftly discarded by the higher social classes, perpetuating the constant evolution of trends. This cycle underscores that the acquisition of consumer goods extends beyond considerations of beauty, utility, or mere boredom relief. Status, evidently, plays a pivotal role in consumerism—the value of a good is intrinsically tied to its social significance when displayed. All of these elements are deemed essential for acceptance within the societal circles one aspires to belong to.

The Simulation, Hyper Consumerism, and the Production of Desires

Our inherent coding, as Baudrillard suggests, directs us to purchase as a means of belonging, forming part of a collective individuality. This inclination implies that our quest for goods stems from a longing for an artificial sense of self-progress, one that is often obstructed given voids within ourselves. Consequently, items become symbols representing our aspirations to integrate and flourish within specific communities or categories within the "simulation", another term created by Baudrillard, referring to the creation of images and ideas that become more real than the actual reality (Baudrillard, 1981, Simulacra and Simulation). Colin Campbel, a sociologist, encapsulates this by stating, "Romanticism was an important part of the consumer's outlook. (...) The consumer withdraws from reality as fast as they encounter it ever-casting his daydreams forward in time, attaching them to objects of desire--those of which personally bring them closer towards the achievement of a certain goal (Campbell, 2018)." Humans, as emphasized by Baudrillard's code, are programmed to chase what they lack, believing that acquiring goods symbolizing their desires brings them closer to fulfillment. This pursuit yields a fleeting sense of enjoyment and pleasure. Engulfed in this ideology, we compulsively seek novelty and instant gratification, using the accumulation of goods as a means of self-fulfillment, attempting to bridge the gap within our personas.

An evident example of this concept is the notion of the "new rich" — individuals who rapidly amass wealth. Deep down, despite their newfound affluence, they still perceive themselves as lacking it, prompting purchases of designer clothes and luxury items adorned with logos in an attempt to reflect their wealth in the eyes of society. This conspicuous consumption is a try to validate their social status, a sense of value they may have lacked before their financial ascent. Their pursuit indicates a missing belonging within an opulent community, driving desires for goods that symbolize achievement in contrast to their initial identity (Our Consumer Society, 2022). The momentary happiness derived from buying these symbols creates an illusion of progress towards fulfillment, filling the void that previously caused discontent. Ultimately, consumption transforms into a spectacle detached from genuine needs, constructing identities based on what individuals possess or lack of.

Furthermore, celebrities, or better, consumption heroes, wield a significant influence in perpetuating the illusion of the simulation. They serve as potent models of mimicry, showcasing a desirable lifestyle through

their endorsement of brands and products (Veen & College, n.d.). Yet, it's crucial to recognize that their portrayal in the media is a curated facet of the simulation—a projection of the idealized self. For instance, the saying, "Don't sell shoes, sell lovely feet," encapsulates the essence of consumerism, where it mirrors upon a product, not itself, but the idealism of what it means to buy it (Our Consumer Society, 2022). It speaks volumes about the underlying desire: people don't merely seek the material item itself but aspire to embody the persona associated with it. When a famous figure, embodying qualities one aspires to possess—a healthy lifestyle, impeccable fashion sense, popularity—showcases a product, it subconsciously attracts individuals by projecting those traits onto the consumer. The allure lies not in the object but in the promise of acquiring elements of the consumption hero's identity, leading to a perceived transformation, whether in appearance, likability, or style (Veen & College, n.d.). This phenomenon taps into the psychological desire for self-improvement and emulation of admired personas, fueling the perpetuation of consumer culture.

The Simulation, Hyper Consumerism, and the Production of Desires

Karl Marx, a German-born philosopher, economist, and political theorist, delves into why contemporary society grapples with a profound sense of alienation from the self, shedding light on our inclination towards hyper-consumerism. Survival within our societal framework necessitates work for sustenance—food on tables, roofs over heads, all conditional to earning money. However, Marx posits that work, in its current form, "is an 'alien' to the worker"—it does not resonate with their natural essence (Petrović, 2023). This disconnect arises from various factors, for instance the lack of control laborers have over the products they produce in a capitalist structure. He mentioned that, in an ideal setting, one would rightfully own what they develop or create; yet, within the confines of the system, this ownership is diverted to the bourgeoisie. For example, an apple harvested from a tree, under different circumstances, should rightfully belong to the laborer; instead, it is claimed by the employer. This detachment from the end result, coupled with monotonous, repetitive tasks devoid of personal fulfillment or creativity, evokes a sense of deprivation rather than contentment, leaving workers physically drained and mentally devalued (Petrović, 2023). This estrangement extends beyond creations, severing the link to the labor process itself. Work transforms from a means of self-fulfillment to a compulsory chore—undertaken not by choice but by necessity for survival.

As a result of the process of alienation, an individual finds himself at home only during his leisure, whereas at work, he feels disconnected, and even 'homeless'. Here, the role of media, deeply entrenched in consumer culture--the purchase and consumption of goods and services in society--, becomes pivotal in diverting attention from the existential misery caused by alienation (Indústria Cultural, 2021). Consider a laborer spending exhausting hours at a factory, eagerly anticipating his return home. Then, instead of confronting the issues hindering genuine happiness, the television becomes a refuge. However, amidst the programming, an advertisement intervenes, flaunting a new lawn mower and portraying an overjoyed figure applauding its life-changing virtues. Instantly, the laborer's reality fades as the advertised product emerges as a pathway towards gratification and happiness. Succumbing to this temptation, the laborer makes the purchase; in Marx's words: "Every man speculates upon creating a new need in another in order to force him to a new sacrifice, to place him in a new dependence, and to entice him into a new kind of pleasure and thereby economic ruin (Marx, 1844)." Moreover, this quote encapsulates the consumer industry's ploy, redirecting attention toward material acquisitions and consumption to briefly alleviate the pains of alienation, by securing the workers' acceptance towards the oppressive reality they endure.

The Aftermath of Consumption

As it became evident, exclaimed by philosophers such as Baudrillard and Karl Marx, the unending pursuit of novelty compels individuals to purchase incessantly, aiming to fill an inner void. Furthermore, consumption seems to serve as a shield against the negative emotions we conceal about ourselves; a desperate attempt to draw one nearer to genuine happiness. Regrettably, in our current society, a perpetual dissatisfaction persists, often rooted in personal insufficiencies. Despite the fleeting joy derived from purchasing and consumption, it remains superficial, lacking longevity (A Sociedade de Consumo Jean Baudrillard, 2023). This fleeting satisfaction followed by an inevitable sense of scarcity perpetuates a cycle where society becomes fixated on the prospect of boosting artificial happiness through the consumption of goods. As Benjamin Franklin famously stated, "Money [or, in this case, goods] has never made men happy, nor will it; there is nothing in its nature to produce happiness. The more of it one has, the more it wants." This quote underscores the idea that the more one acquires, the greater their desire for more possessions becomes. This relentless pursuit is fueled by the dopamine rush of immediate gratification, only to fade quickly, leaving individuals returning to their initial state of discontent (A Sociedade de Consumo Jean Baudrillard, 2023) .

Baudrillard, once again, emphasizes the profound negative consequences induced by consumption at an amplified level. According to him, it intertwines with alienation, imprisoning individuals in an inescapable cycle (McLaverty, 2012). Here, the relentless pursuit of the next trend obscures and dims genuine appreciation for acquired products. The drive to consume intensifies as individuals, driven by an increasingly subconscious urge, succumb to the allure of keeping pace with the illusory trends perpetuated by consumer society, since, in a way, obtaining the best and the latest could emulate the perceived happiness projected by consumption heroes, for instance (McLaverty, 2012). However, amidst this pursuit, personal autonomy fades. Influenced by Baudrillard's concept of the simulation, one's choices and desires become molded, gradually eroding their senses and self-identity (Baudrillard, Simulacra and Simulation). Individuals do not know what they like anymore, they only acknowledge what, in society's eyes, is considered an ideal. Consequently, this loss of significance propels them into an existential void where the pathway to authentic happiness becomes elusive, compelling a perpetual quest to fill this void with material possessions, and again, a more aggressive sentence to alienation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, consumerism has evolved from a simple framework of survival and necessity--an elaborate development from Aristotle's critique to post-World War II's celebration--to a complex network that dictates our desires, social value, and sense of self. Baudrillard's "code" expands on how consumption no longer merely fulfills utilitarian needs but operates within a constructed societal fantasy, creating a maze of desires to conform to this artificial reality, foremost creating a system where possessions bridge personal voids while blurring genuine needs. The pursuit of novelty, identity, and belonging fuels this hyper-consumerist culture, propelling us to seek validation and progress through possessions, perpetually chasing fleeting moments of satisfaction in order to compress the alienation we feel towards ourselves and others, as imposed by Karl Marx's concept of alienation in labor, which showcases how the consumer culture diverts attention from existential misery. However, as described by Baudrillard, despite offering a brief sense of joy, this pursuit perpetuates a cycle of dissatisfaction and scarcity, imprisoning society in an endless cycle where one becomes addicted to the prospect of boosting artificial and momentary bliss through the consumption of goods that resemble the ideals of happiness. This cycle, indeed, estranges individuals from genuine contentment, propelling an unending quest to fill emotional voids with material possessions, finally, fueling an never-ending urge towards consumption

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