

Coexist perspective ADCD7001

The Politics of Desire: Consumerism Trap

Theme: The Politics of Desire - Postcapitalism and Platform Culture

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Submission Date: Thursday, December 15, 2022

Word Count: 3603

Introduction

The desire to consume has become a worldwide cultural movement with the development of capitalist society and globalisation. Consumption is natural. After all, we humans are animals and we have needs. And the popularity of consumerism has certainly contributed to boosting demand and economic growth. The capitalist ideology of believing that sustained and increased consumption activity helps the economy is the economic engine of the developed world. The rationale is to increase people's motivation to work through consumption and to promote economic development by increasing the stimulus to consumption. Conversely, the negative effects of consumerism are not encouraging. The over-consumption of our growing desires has become the main pleasure we seek in our daily lives. Consumerism is a product of the expansion of the logic of capital, a conspiracy to achieve the hidden will to proliferate and preserve its domination, driven by the profit-seeking property of capital. A developed cultural industry has enabled films, radio and magazines to serve the promotion of consumer ideas, advertising has flourished thanks to electronic technology, and consumer induction has permeated every detail of life. In such a 'rational' society, people's views on labour, needs, consumption and happiness are gradually transformed, and what Marcuse calls 'false needs' are cultivated (Zhang, 2022). Similarly, Baudrillard (1998) argues that in a consumer society, the prevalence of consumer goods becomes the justification for the existence of capitalism, where everything is deconstructed and coded into various forms of 'consumer goods', and where consumption is not only a pure act of satisfying material desires, but also an act, means and strategy of manipulating 'tokens' for various purposes. Consumerism creates a total domination of the logic of capital over the individual and society, a spiritual anaesthesia for the masses, an illusion that envelops society. Therefore, Baudrillard (2000) argues that we are in a situation where 'consumption' controls the whole of life.

This essay focuses on the invasion of "consumerism" as a new ideology of the power of capital into the world of everyday life, stripping away the subjective values of contemporary society, depleting social resources and destroying the ecological environment, and discusses some contemporary artworks that satirise consumerism in order to provide the reader with a brief critique.

Promoting a market economy

Virtuous consumption is one of the most important drivers that can contribute to long term economic development. The essence of consumption for economic development is to make more wealth available in the market, thus promoting the expansion of production, and thus the process of increasing wealth from the scale of society as a whole. The increase in consumption leads to the multiplication of supply, and the increase in supply leads to the expansion of production, so that the process of social production-consumption-reproduction proceeds in an orderly and structured manner, and economic development is promoted while achieving a balance between supply and demand. Consumption drives national economic growth and promotes economic development, and the new demand it creates plays an important role in guiding the adjustment and upgrading of production (Yu, 2008). On the one hand, the increase in the number of consumers and the expansion of consumer demand can drive the development of the production of related enterprises and enhance the vitality of enterprises; on the other hand, the upgrading of the consumption structure can lead to the upgrading of the production structure of enterprises, leading to the transformation and upgrading of the industrial structure and optimising the structure of economic development.

Firstly, a consumption-promoting economy is designed to raise people's consumption levels. As technology and the internet continue to advance and

develop, tax cuts and rising levels of economic development have led to an increase in disposable income and a gradual change in the public's perception of consumption. The traditional structure of consumer demand is facing huge challenges, and under the pressure of consumer demand, the supply side must also accelerate the pace of technological progress and develop production methods that prioritise the satisfaction of consumer demand (Squirrel Factory, 2022). Changes in consumer demand are followed by a consequent rise or fall in prices, and the market achieves adjustments to the industrial structure on the supply side through price fluctuations. The price mechanism communicates to producers the current demand for a product in the market and also the profit that can be made and the cost required to produce that type of product. At the same time, the level of consumption and the structure of consumption is one of the important criteria for measuring the living standard of residents. Whereas consumerism makes people obsessed with material possessions, it is a way of life in which people pursue material pleasures, so that the constant satisfaction of material and hedonistic needs inevitably raises people's consumption levels.

Secondly, rising consumer demand has played a positive role in promoting market development. In addition to the positive effect of consumption on the transformation and upgrading of industries, it also puts forward the requirement for those working on the supply side, producers or service providers, etc., to improve their quality, which means that education, scientific and technological innovation, social security, etc., must all follow suit and therefore also improve the quality of producers, all of which play a constructive role in the country's healthy development. Still, the way in which consumption affects the economy is mainly through the expansion of consumer demand, which leads to economic growth, and thus consumer demand being expanded, but the regulation of the economy with consumer demand is more active and effective.

The pursuit of symbolic value and overconsumption

Consumerism makes people fall under the "symbolic values" shaped by capital. Baudrillard (1998) argues that in the context of the post-World War II transformation of capitalist society, ... consumption at this time was not just an economic act, but a cultural one. In economically developed capitalist countries, where the necessities of life have become widespread, people no longer buy goods based on their substantive functions, but on symbols or messages that create differences with others. This subtle difference is an important reason for the infinite growth of consumer desire. For centuries before that, the needs of the 'customer' were self-selecting and the providers of products needed to satisfy them. However, in the value system of capitalist societies, the encouragement of consumption became a necessary means of economic growth. Thus, driven by capitalism, the 'consumer' replaces the 'customer' as a de-individualised abstraction, whose essence is the masses, but whose 'needs' are actually created by the producers. is created by the producers. As a result, the meaning of a commodity is reshaped. A commodity is never a mere object; behind it is an output of ideas and values. Especially after the concept of branding has been implemented, repeated and reinforced, when people buy a commodity, they actually value the cultural, symbolic and aesthetic qualities behind the object more than the use value of the commodity. From the pursuit of the use value of the object to the consumption of desire itself, people's consumption has been alienated and consumption has become the only ultimate goal. Consumerism is a developmental approach that aims to stimulate economic growth alone, ignoring the harmonious development of the economy, the environment, society and culture, and the excessive pursuit of material consumption has led to the alienation of consumption (Li, 2008, pp. 7-8). Unlike the traditional sense in which consumption was mainly about the use value of goods, today's society attaches greater importance to the symbolic symbolism embodied in consumption, such as reputation, status, taste, fashion

and desire. A particular system of consumption often constitutes a special coding system. To consume a certain product is to consume its symbolic meaning. For example, when we choose to buy a Chanel bag, we are not buying it for its practicality, but for a value symbol, or even a status label. And the various advertising industries exist to stimulate consumption, to give the illusion that one can acquire the invisible qualities that advertising attaches to these goods through the act of consumption, of purchase, a cultural and identity label symbol.

Consumer society has completely commercialised everyday life. In modern society, there is a general compulsion to consume, both in terms of objects and activities. On the one hand, there is no escape from the consumption of both material and immaterial things, and on the other hand, the entire field of people's daily life is thoroughly colonised by commercial activity. People want to try everything, because consumers are always afraid of missing out on something, of missing out on any kind of enjoyment. This is most evident in the windows of businesses in the world's metropolises, which are at once museums of current popular culture, public demonstrations of social consumption trends and barometers showing changes in everyday life. People escape from the repetitive mechanisms of daily work by satisfying their material consumption desires, thereby gaining self-worth and inner satisfaction and pleasure. All this is in fact the desire to consume that drives people to determine what is life, what is needed in every house, what is happiness and other concepts and value judgements. This is the trap of consumerism, which reduces the multiple social needs of man to a single material need.

On the other hand, the pitfalls of a consumer society have led to a gradual loss of rational thinking as people's spiritual needs and values become entertained, leading to the ultimate "Amusing ourselves to death". Gavriel Salomon in

'Amusing ourselves to death' said that looking at a photograph requires only recognition, while looking at a text requires comprehension. The photograph does not bring any "context", even without a caption, explanation or introduction, it is just a picture (Postman, 2015). The advent of television made the audience completely passive, and the totalisation of entertainment in the age of universal television began to separate reason from the masses. The advent of industrial civilisation was followed by a phase of industrialisation, urbanisation and modernisation. This process led to a great expansion of "instrumental rationality". Instrumental rationality means that action is driven only by the pursuit of utilitarian motives, that action is driven by reason to achieve the desired ends that one needs, and that the actor thinks purely in terms of maximising results, ignoring human emotional pursuits and spiritual values. Materialism and money become the immediate ends that people pursue, so instrumental rationality goes to extremes and the means becomes the end, an iron cage that is placed on people. The expansion of material desire caused by instrumental rationality has led to an ever-increasing desire for consumption, thus leading to over-consumption and a gradual fall into the trap of consumerism. Hao (2015) points out that over-consumption is a consumption behaviour that exceeds one's actual consumption capacity, where the quantity purchased is greater than the quantity actually used, resulting in a waste of resources.

Environmental damage and resource wastage

The waste of society's resources puts a lot of pressure on the planet. The idea of consumerism amplifies the desire for the possession and consumption of goods, thus furthering the expansion of social production. However, the reality of positive prices for products makes businesses more eager to stimulate people's desire to consume. In other words, consumerism creates and exacerbates the contradiction between the unlimited desire of individuals to

possess goods and the limited availability of resources. To a certain extent, consumerism is associated with overproduction and overconsumption of resources, the consequences of which exacerbate the shortage of resources in developing countries. In fact, as consumption continues to escalate, many people struggle not with "too little" consumption, but with "too much", "it's hard not to buy, but to regret it". When the accumulation of goods exceeds the carrying capacity of life, it is not only the goods themselves that are "unaccounted for", but also the lifestyle and resources that are tied up in excessive consumption. Rampha (1993) argues that the issue of consumption is at the heart of environmental problems and that the impact of humans on the biosphere is creating pressures on the environment and threatening the planet's ability to support life. Just as capital destroys its own market, the more the production of prestige value increases, the more capital's damage to its own productive profits intensifies, and the more the production of surplus value is based on the destructive exploitation of nature in the broadest sense of the word.

Ecological and environmental problems are becoming increasingly prominent. Durning () believes that our mode of production is dependent on a huge and constant input of commodities. The production of these commodities, energy, chemicals, metals and paper, has a serious impact on the planet. In the same vein, Rampha (1993) sees the environment as a 'scavenger' for the solution to the problem of human over-consumption. But the environment will demand a 'return' from the consumer in various ways, and this 'return' is likely to be catastrophic. On the one hand, human expansion has led to the encroachment, destruction and pollution of the habitat of many wild species, and in some cases their disappearance. Human greed has also intensified the hunting and seizure of rare plants and animals, leading to more extinction and endangerment. On the other hand, the industrial waste discarded by high consumption has

seriously polluted the environment. In 2000, 50% of the world's wetlands were destroyed, the per capita supply of fresh water was 30% lower than 25 years ago, desertification has affected nearly 1 billion people in more than 100 countries, forest resources are disappearing at a rate of 1600 hectares per year, 30% of global biodiversity has been lost in the last 30 years, 1/3 of mammals, 1/8 of plant species and 1/10 of tree species are facing extinction. It has been proven that the human desire fuelled by consumerism far exceeds the capacity of the earth's resources, and that the waste generated by it largely exceeds the capacity of natural ecosystems to repair themselves. The danger that consumerism poses to the ecological environment and social resources cannot be ignored.

Contemporary art satirises consumerism

Many modern artists now use a range of visual and conceptual techniques to critique consumerism. They investigate issues of trade and exchange, study the labour involved in producing these things, talk about international supply chains, and look at the issue of values or the role of consumption in the formation of our identity in an effort to deconstruct the phenomenon from the inside out. Each of these pieces of art illustrates the artist's critique of consumerism from a different angle.



Fig.1 House of Fire, James Rosenquist, 1989

Rosenquist's paintings directly reflect the cultural landscape of consumerism and the American culture, economy and politics of the 1960s and 1970s. His paintings, which are the size of billboards, have a striking visual presence in the gallery. Additionally, in his paintings, Rosenquist demonstrates his long-standing interest in and mastery of texture, colour, line and shape, the kind of style that lies somewhere between abstract painting and realistic technique that continues to influence younger generations of artists. Overall, he uses pictures that are most directly related to mass media and the symbolism and formality of advertising to generate a true sense of contemporary consumer life for the audience in the gallery.

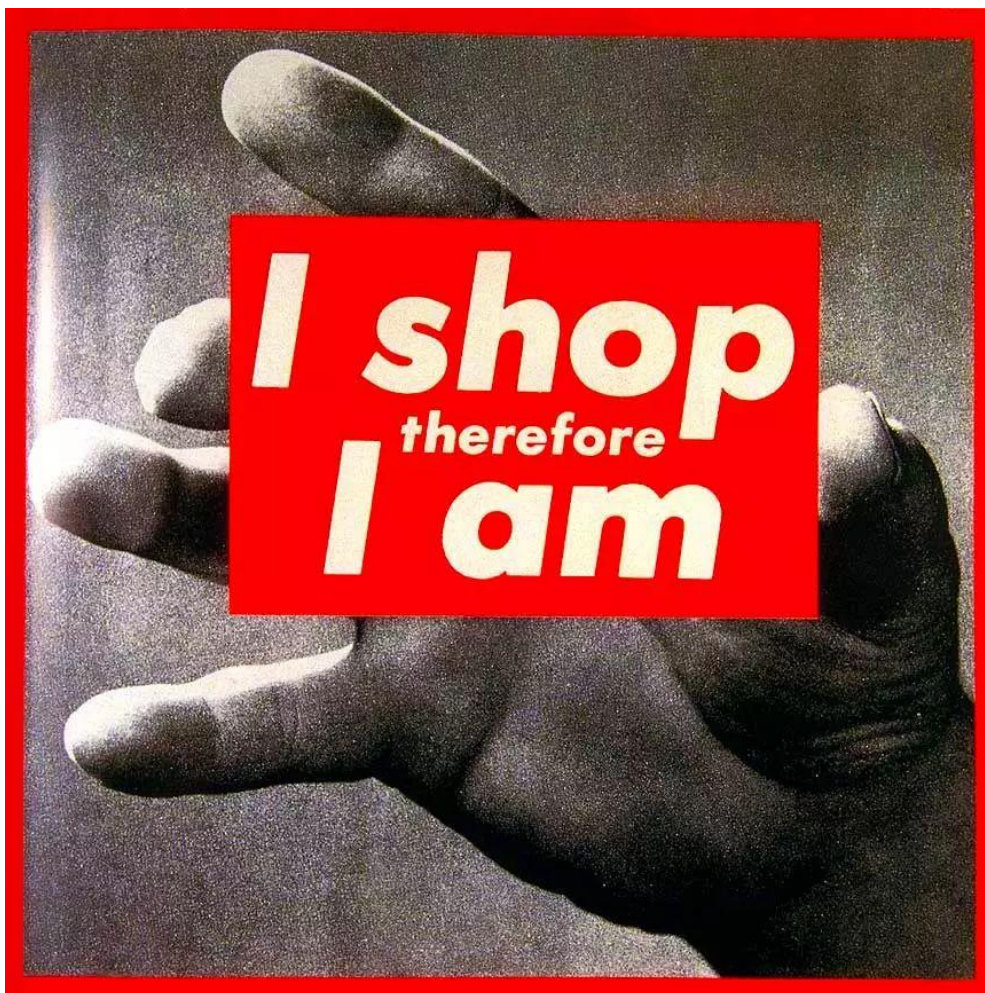


Fig.2 I Shop Therefore I Am , Barbara Kruger, 1987

By the 1970s onwards, the rising community of female artists also began to discuss consumerism. Since, in the traditional concept of the family, the woman,

the head of the family, was mostly the consumer responsible for household purchases. As a result, Housewives who fill a huge cart at the grocery store with quickly disappearing items have thus become the major subject of criticism and parody by feminists. Famous feminist artist Barbara Kruger used powerful words and monochrome images to create a number of conceptual artworks. These pieces, which frequently use red capital letters, scream satirical phrases and then blanket walls, billboards, buses, or building facades. Barbara Kruger was a prominent feminist and conceptual artist who developed a straightforward, understandable, clever, and potent visual language. The most well-known of her pieces is the 1987 piece *I Shop Therefore I Am*. She had a strong understanding of the cultural and journalistic backdrop of consumerism in terms of visual form, which she used to compile satirical and critical works.



Fig.3 Jesus Christ with Shopping Bags, Banksy , 2005

In one of Banksy's works from 2005, we see the rebel artist's desperate view of the desire to over-consume: a dead Jesus on an invisible cross, each hand laden with fine shopping bags. The meaning of this work simply goes without saying and is obvious to all - consumerism has killed God. However, this is not the first time Banksy has focused on consumer culture.



Fig.4 Girl with balloon, Banksy , 2018, Video screenshots

Perhaps you have all seen the video of Banksy's famous Sotheby's auction in which the frame 'cuts' the painting. Here is just a representative selection of screenshots. At the auction, his \$1.1 million Girl with Balloon was sold, and out of nowhere, the installation behind the canvas sliced the painting into strips - and everyone in the room was dumbfounded. But it soon became clear that the auction was also the artist's latest performance piece: the moment the hammer was hammered, a work of art was torn far from the world it belonged to, abandoned and banished. However, the uniqueness of this painting on the auction market, the sense of presence attached to it, adds to the market value of this "broken painting". The work of art has been reduced to a commercial product for the consumer market.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although consumer society has contributed to a certain extent to society and the economy, the negative effects of consumerism cannot be ignored and must be taken into account. Although, from an economic perspective, consumerism can enhance consumer demand, help improve people's quality of life, expand consumer markets, improve consumer satisfaction, increase consumer power, broaden consumption space and

promote stable economic growth. In addition, virtuous consumption can also lead to the development of social culture and promote social prosperity. However, the negative effects of consumerism far outweigh its positive effects. On the one hand, consumerism creates a desire to buy, which leads to greed and an endless cycle of capital, where the 'symbolic values' that are shaped limit their horizons, indulge them in uncontrolled consumption and commercialise their daily lives. Hedonism has become a widespread phenomenon in consumerist societies, where over-consumption has become commonplace and has led some people into financial crisis, thus affecting the economic situation of consumers. Debt is not the problem, the problem is that society, nowadays, is constantly preaching the benefits of early consumption, even, somewhat radically. Not only are video commercials running rampant, but some of the soft-core articles promoting consumerism are also deeply popular. Countless playful and funny articles tell you that buying is the way to solve all your worries, but not one article tells you how many years of dedication are behind many of the people who can buy. This kind of precision marketing that magnifies the results at the expense of the process and the benefits at the expense of the costs has led many impulsive teenagers down the road of no return to circular borrowing. On the other hand, consumerism has led to a greater emphasis on material pursuits, amplified material desires, a huge increase in consumer spending and a huge amount of resources being wasted without being used effectively. This situation puts enormous pressure on the earth, aggravates environmental pollution, destroys the ecological balance and poses a threat to the health of the planet. It may even affect the health of consumers.

Therefore, in the face of the destructive effects of consumerism, it is all the more incumbent upon us to take effective measures. While we give full play to the role of consumption as a catalyst for the economy, encouraging consumption is

not the same as pursuing material pleasures, and upgrading consumption is not an encouragement to over-consumption. We must be wary of the value of over-consumption, dispel the "myth" that consumption is pleasure, and restrain excessive consumption behaviour. Firstly, reducing income inequality means that the income level of the high-income group will rise, and their consumption power will also increase, and the demand for flexible goods, which are the focus of their consumption, will therefore increase. At the same time, reducing income inequality will also improve the social status of high-income earners, who will pay more attention to the quality of consumption and the level of consumption, thus promoting their consumption upgrade. Secondly, the mainstream media should play its role in guiding values, guiding people to rational and moderate consumption in society, raising people's awareness of consumption through education, forming a green lifestyle, cultivating a positive attitude towards consumption and establishing the correct concept of consumption. Secondly, the media should vigorously promote and show the richness of the good life, tearing down the veil of extreme "good life" shaped by the advertising media under the impetus of consumerism, and guiding people to pay more attention to the spiritual dimension of consumption needs. Finally, we should start by saving resources and energy, take practical action to reduce the waste of resources, actively protect the earth's ecological environment, especially in the areas of environmental pollution, energy consumption and climate change, and strengthen environmental protection to ensure the long-term sustainable development of the earth and mankind. At the same time, we should take environmental protection and sustainable development as a national action and strive to put this responsibility into the daily behaviour of everyone, starting with ourselves, to do our part to protect the Earth's environment.

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Fig.1 Rosenquist, J. (1989) House of Fire. Available at:

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Fig.2 Kruger, B. (1987) I Shop Therefore I Am. Available at:

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Fig.3 Banksy (2005) Jesus Christ with Shopping Bags. Available at:

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Fig.4 Banksy (2018) Girl with balloon. Available at:

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