

Sustaining Consumerism

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Many would argue that due to increasing prosperity in many parts of the western world we now live in a consumer society, a society in which the buying and selling of goods and services takes precedence over the production of materials as a result of increasing affluence and further individualism (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, 2009). In this critical reflection I will consider how our lifestyles and current ways of life are one of the largest threats to our planet in contemporary society. Our modern technologies require massive amounts of energy. Our obsession with consuming new goods and services is leaving vast amounts of waste around the globe, and as our consumption increases, we require a larger resource base in order to meet the growth and demand. Due to this demand, our planet has been out of balance for many years, and this resulting imbalance has shown itself in the form of climate change and global warming (Orecchia, 2007).



In traditional societies, people's identities were primarily formed by their profession, with very few choices involved (Durkheim, 1951). People in the western world once identified strongly with their job, but since the rapid decline of manual labour and industry, people have sought jobs in the public service sectors. Under modern

capitalism, the individual has many more choices. As a result of this, people have lost a connection they once had with an industrial based society, and instead look to other sources in order to find an identity. For Bauman (2005) this constitutes an important change— a society centred previously on work has been replaced with one centred on consumption. People now derive their identities from consumable goods (clothes, cars and mobile phones for example) rather than their vocation (Bauman, 2005). This

‘purchasing’ of an identity fills the void that is left from being disassociated with one’s work. French theorist Jean Baudrillard (1998) called this ‘Conspicuous Consumption’.

Baudrillard’s theory claims that an individual’s worth has now been replaced with possessions rather than the work that they do. This is not without benefit as individuals are free to pick and choose their lifestyles, as well as moulding the way they wish to be seen through the consumption of goods (Baudrillard, 1998). As our need for commercial goods increases, however, so does the need for ‘the next big thing’. Gadgets develop at an unsustainable rate, and in turn this makes the past models out of date and seem out of fashion. Consequently, past models lose their



consumer value in our society. Apple are one of the main perpetrators for this.

‘Manufactured obsolescence’ is when a product is designed with an artificially limited lifespan, making the product obsolete after a certain period of time (Sarhan, 2016). This means that one must purchase the next model as the old one is likely to break within a certain timespan. Apple also makes users unable to alter the

device in any way, meaning that if for example the battery dies in a phone, the user is unable to replace the old one themselves without repercussions from Apple. This is clearly needlessly wasteful. They are also guilty of pushing new updates that make every device that’s not the newest model slower to push users into upgrading device. This perpetuates the need to have the newest iPhone, as users feel it necessary in order to keep their impressive social status. This practice is very harmful for the environment. More waste is produced that will go to landfills, and as new

phones are consistently seen as the ‘next big thing’ more people are purchasing them, and as such more energy is needed in order to sustain them.

Our modern, western capitalism can only function through this production and selling of goods. The more that is produced, the more that is consumed and as such we can ‘progress’ and live in ‘prosperity’ (The single, most integral measure of economic growth is a countries’ Gross National Product). The downside, however, is that producing, shipping and consuming commodities requires the use of

natural resources (fossil fuels, wood and ores). This means building factories to process these finite resources. These factories produce toxic by-products, and the use of many of our commodities (like cars, for example) create pollution and waste (Robbins, 2001) like poisoned soils, streams filled with toxic chemicals, and thick smog that can damage all it touches. Whole species can become contaminated and unsafe to eat, more than one billion people on earth lack access to clean water, while another 2.4 billion don't have access to sufficient sanitation (WWF, 2016). This constant, unrelenting exposure to air pollutants could lead to health issues amongst humans too, causing acute respiratory issues like lung cancer. This can put a strain on the NHS/healthcare services due to a rise in the number of cases of illnesses. There does not look to be much hope in the near future as Donald Trump has revealed his energy plans for the United States. He has called for more fossil fuel drilling and fewer regulations, as well as vowing to cancel the Paris climate agreement, which took place in 2015 and committed many



nations to take steps to curb the threat of climate change (Parker, 2016).

We have become disconnected with the one thing that we should never have lost touch with. Our planet. Our consumer practices continue to increase and we become more and more globalised, but capitalism will never have enough. We are the only solution to our own problem, but it seems unlikely that anything will be done until it is far too late. Developed

countries are shipping their waste to less developed countries, and this is leading to habitat loss, as space is needed for landfills and processing plants. Due to this habitat loss as a direct result of our consumer culture, ecosystems are collapsing, or being

transformed into much less hospitable environments. This means that, at a historic level, some species are overcrowding others due to this habitat change (that is if they avoid extinction altogether). Populations of vertebrate animals like mammals, birds and fish have declined by 58% between 1970 and 2012, and freshwater species of fish in particular have dropped by 81% in this same time period (WWF,

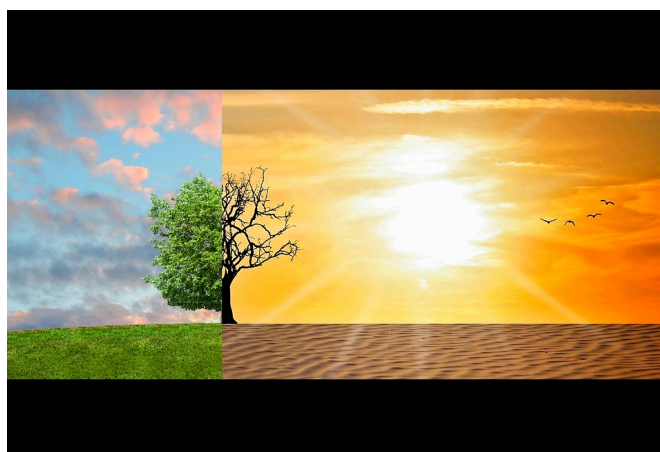
2016). In England, plans for fracking to take place in Lancashire have just been approved, leading to yet even more environmental loss and potential damage to people's livelihood and community (BBC, 2016). This is due to our need for energy to power our current wasteful lifestyles. The UK government is taking any means necessary in order to obtain energy in the face of the increasing scarceness of current resources.

A study published by the *Journal of Industrial Ecology* reveals that products we consume, like

clothes, gadgets and food, contribute up to 60% of the world's global greenhouse gas emissions and between 50 to 80% of total land and water use (Hubacek, 2016). Urry (2011) argues that the

problem of climate change is a huge threat, but it is simply being overlooked. He argues that we are delaying the acceptance of responsibility as it is perceived as a problem for the future, though it is taking place right now. Climate change is the single biggest threat to the global economy and the earth itself (Elliott, 2016). Events such as terrorist attacks and Europe's refugee crisis are being pushed to the headlines as people do not wish to deal with the harsh

reality that we are responsible for this disaster. We have already seen the impact of climate change on our planet. We see footage of the icecaps melting and habitats being lost. Even flooding in the UK has been directly linked to climate change. The Committee on Climate Change (CCC) published a 2017 risk assessment that claimed the UK will be hit with even more widespread flooding, and what we typically think of as a hot summer now would be considered typical by the middle of the century (CCC, 2016).



People in our society are aware of climate change yet still do not take action. We have been aware of climate change for over 30 years, and yet we still consume an inordinate

amount. Within our current economic system, it seems that we risk being stuck in a society that is not only destructive to our own planet, but also contributes to the sharp contrast of immense hunger and poverty amongst such needless wealth. As long as we live to consume, the issue of climate change and global warming will be constantly ignored and overlooked by those in power until it is much too late, and that is seemingly the only time when action will be

taken. We are encouraged to be selfish and live for ourselves in order to have the best car and the latest fashion. We are encouraged to consume and consume and we have become so comfortable in doing so that looking to the future, change looks seemingly impossible. One must ask if humanity is prepared to make the sacrifices required for change.

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