



Consumerism is Making Us Sick, But That's Just What Capitalism Wants

Lois Fergie

Consumer culture emerged in Western capitalist societies in the late 20th century and the centrality of production was replaced with consumption. The rise of consumerism is praised for breaking down social divisions, allowing class distinctions to blur and thus accommodating increased social mobility. The mass production of goods and their increased accessibility to individuals allows the reconstructions of social identities presenting greater choice for individuals (Featherstone, 1990). This is supported by the work of Douglas and Isherwood; the consumption of particular goods is advantageous in helping people create new social relations whereby these products are of common interests. In addition, consumption is also claimed to be beneficial for giving people a sense of satisfaction and excitement in their lives (Featherstone, 1990).

It has been suggested that consumerism has also glamorized everyday life through meanings associated with consuming goods and services which are portrayed as luxurious through media and advertising. This is because the media revealed a new profitable platform

for capitalists to exploit through online shopping and commercial advertising (Laughey, 2007). These advertisements provide us with “instructions” for how to achieve the “good life” through consuming the latest commodities and services (Dittmar, 2007 p.7). Accommodating the rise in



consumerism was our shift in occupational structure to the service sector meaning that individuals now consume services just as much as they can consume physical goods. This has brought opportunities for social

mobility and increased economic income in western societies due to the increased demand for white-collar professional roles. Services in financial, educational, health and leisure consumption sectors require more qualifications and skills among employees and so has been beneficial in improving the education and skill set of the populations (Webster, 2006).

Consumerism does have its benefits, but why then, in rich consumer societies, are individuals increasingly suffering from mental

illnesses? In the UK, one in four people will obtain a mental health issue every year (Mind, 2018). Global Burden of Disease statistics show a steady increase in depression disorders in the United Kingdom, the United States and also Central Europe (Healthdata.org, 2018). This article will be arguing that consumerism is not beneficial for individuals in society, because the “good-life” is not achievable for all and negatively impacts mental health.

Zygmunt Bauman (2007) suggests that consumerism thrives from our desire to consume goods that immediately satisfy us, despite this feeling being temporary. The goods then need to be replaced regularly to maintain this satisfaction and prevent us feeling unhappy or inferior to others with more affluent goods. This is supported by James (2007) who highlights that our consumer society makes us constantly feel the need to compare what we have with others, judge who is superior and if we need to consume more to improve ourselves.

Bauman (2007) concludes that consumerism is maintained by our unhappiness and desire for prestige, as we now rely on consumerism to improve our self-esteem, social identity and mental well-being. Individual’s dissatisfaction with what they have is exactly what capitalism takes advantage of when producing new products and advertisements. They are produced for the temporary and ever-changing desires of the population. In addition, whilst Bauman would agree with Featherstone (1990) that consumerism allows for the blurring of class boundaries, he does not see this as absolute. He agrees that consuming goods presents individuals with

more choice regarding how they construct their identities which may allow them further social integration with certain groups but, is aware that this is not the case for lower class individuals who do not possess the means (i.e. economic capital) to obtain more affluent goods (Featherstone 1990). Therefore, they are left with the struggle to try and achieve unreachable goals and commonly experience high levels of distress and anxiety whilst doing

so.

Furthermore, Oliver James’ concept of ‘Affluenza’ accounts for the importance of accumulating “money, possessions, appearances (physical and social) and fame” as markers of success and so thrives off consumerist behaviours (James, 2007: p.xvi). James



(2007) deemed this as the result of a new phase of ‘Selfish capitalism’ which emerged in the 1970’s and brought about a trend of conspicuous consumption in western societies (p.xviii). The perceptions of wants and needs became blurred into the same category and made individuals feel that they ‘need’ lavish products to feel good.

However, this has only worked to increase the inequality gap between the wealthy and the poor in these developed countries as it’s only those who possess substantial wealth that can afford these affluent products (Grant & O’Hara, 2010). James (2007) concludes that

individuals who hold the values of affluenza are more likely to suffer from instances of depression, anxiety, personality disorders and addictions and thus reveals consumerism to be making us susceptible to mental disorders instead of making us happy.

Selfish Capitalism holds many of the same features to that of a neo-liberalist economy which holds the primary role of individuals within society to be consumers (Espasito & Perez, 2014). Neo-liberalism has a huge role in promoting the 'good-life' as it wants to shape individual's behaviour to benefit the market. This has negative impacts on people's mental health as for those who cannot conform to its demands for consumption are deemed as failures for not achieving the good life. This 'failure' is viewed as the fault of the individual rather than that of the market being inaccessible to some (Birch & Mykhnenko, n.d). Individuals may fall into depression or distress due to feeling inadequate for not fitting the norms of our consumer culture. In addition, Epasito & Perez also highlight how mental illness has become marketized (another feature of neo-liberalism) in order to stimulate profits for medical businesses.

This is because psychopharmacological solutions to mental health problems are increasingly commercialised and encourages neo-liberalist motives to individualise society. Adverts are created to encourage the individual to seek medical drug treatments for their mental health issues instead of addressing potential wider social, cultural or economic issues which may be impacting their health. This is not just limited to cases of depression and anxiety but to most medical conditions today and helps to explain

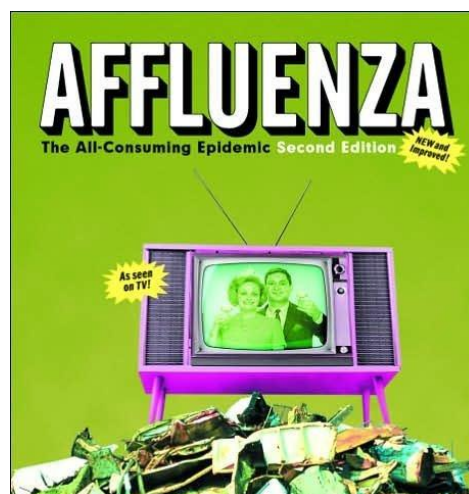
why our society is becoming increasingly medicalized with psychopharmacological prescriptions increasing. This reveals capitalism is aware that it's pressures of efficiency and consumerism are making us sick but additionally exploits this to benefit the market by creating businesses out of medical treatments and services.

Beck's work regarding our movement into a risk society accounts for the risks and consequences that we face because of modern processes i.e. consumerism (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). Beck argues the risks people face vary depending on their class position; those with more wealth and prestige are much safer than those in lower classes (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). This is because Capitalism presents us with the idea of meritocracy; that everybody has the same chance for success regardless of their background, as long as they

are willing to work hard for success (Littler, 2017).

The individualist nature of our risk society, similarly to that of neo-liberalism, means achieving meritocracy is the responsibility of

the individual and failure to do so is at the hand of their own wrong doings. Furlong & Cartmel (1997) acknowledge that this pressure to be successful which is largely accommodated through consumerism has detrimental effects on mental health, explaining its increase, as well as that of eating disorders and suicide. This pressure produces many risks for those who struggle to achieve



the demands of the good-life and may turn to illegitimate means of obtaining wealth and affluence; Merton's strain theory explains that when individuals access to achieve cultural goals is hindered (mostly that of lower classes), they may turn to crime. However, Furlong & Cartmel (1997) explain there has been an emergence of risk prevention strategies as a response to the risks we face today. It could be argued that money lending companies allow individuals to consume good they couldn't afford alone which in turn could reduce their mental strains and need to turn to crime. In addition, many businesses have introduced corporate wellness programmes for employees to improve their physical and mental health, these include fitness trackers and award schemes (Moore & Piwek, 2017).

However, the success of these strategies is limited. Money lending schemes only produce another risk of individuals falling into debts that they cannot pay back thus, placing them back in the same mental vulnerability they started in. In addition, one fifth of lost work days in the UK has been found to be the result of anxiety and depression in the UK and so suggests corporate wellness programmes to lack in effectiveness (Mentalhealth.org, 2018). It could also be argued that corporate wellness programmes and loan companies are just another example of capitalists exploiting out struggles to create new markets and disguising them as good for us (Moore & Piwek, 2017). Furthermore, the idea that the wealthy are protected from the risk of developing mental illness is questionable. Multiple case studies on affluent individuals across the United States, the UK found that even the wealthiest of individuals are riddled with common mental disorders their strive for the 'good-life' has left

them alone and under high pressure to maintain their prestige (James, 2007).

To conclude, it is clear to see that consumerism is not actually as beneficial to individuals as Featherstone outlined for us in the beginning. Whilst increased choice and goods allows some freedom of identity, social mobility and satisfaction, consumerism has put far too much pressure on individuals to achieve material affluence (Featherstone, 1990, Bauman,). This has not only left those of lower classes to feel isolated and highly vulnerable to financial and crime risks but has also increased susceptibility across all classes to mental disorders such as stress, anxiety and depression (James,2007). Throughout this article we have seen that Capitalism uses consumerism to exploit our vulnerabilities. Whilst I have focused on mental health here it is also noted that this is not what their exploitation is limited to and also includes individuals' social position and financial situation etc.

Bibliography:

Baudrillard, Jean & Smart, Barry (2017). **The Consumer Society: myths and structures**. Los Angeles: SAGE Vol. 1

Bauman, Zygmunt (2007). **Consumerism vs consumption' in Consuming Life**. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Birch, Kean & Mykhnenko, Vlad (n.d.). 'A world turned right way up' in **The Rise and Fall of Neoliberalism**. London: Zed Books.

Dittmar, Helga (2008). **Culture, Identity and Well-being: The search for the "Good Life" and the "Body Perfect"**. Hove: Psychology Press.

Espasito, Luigi & Perez, Fernando (2014). 'Neo-liberalism and the Commodification of

Mental Health'. **Humanity & Society**. Vol. 38 (4): 414–442.

Featherstone, Mike (1990). 'Perspectives on Consumer Culture', **Sociology** Vol.24 (1) pp.5-22.

Furlong, Andy & Cartmel, Fred (1997). 'Young People and Social Change: Individualization and Risk' in **Late Modernity**. 2nd edition. Maidenhead: OUP.

Grant, L & O'Hara, Glen (2010). 'Spotlight on: The Spirit Level' **Geography**. Vol. 95. Pp 149-153.

Healthdata.org (2018). 'GBD Compare' **IHME** [Online] < <https://vizhub.healthdata.org/gbd-compare/>> [Accessed: 04/12/18]

James, Oliver (2007). **Affluenza: How to be Successful and Stay Sane**. London: Vermillion.

Laughey, Dan (2007). 'What is media theory?' **Consumerism and Everyday Life**. Maidenhead: OUP.

Little, Jo (2017). **Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power & Myths of Mobility**. London: Routledge.

Mind (2018). 'Mental health facts and statistics' **Mind.org.uk** [online] < <https://www.mind.org.uk/> [Accessed: 29/11/18]

Mentalhealth.org, (2018). 'Mental health statistics: the most common mental health problems' Mental Health Foundation. [Online] <<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/statistics/mental-health-statistics-most-common-mental-health-problems>> [Accessed: 09/12/18]

Moore, Phoebe & Piwek, Lukasz (2017). 'Regulating wellbeing in the brave new

quantified workplace'. **Employee Relations**. Vol. 39 (3) Pp.308-316.

Webster, Frank (2006) 'What is an Information society?' in **Theories of the Information Society**. London: Routledge.

Image Sources:

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/saulalbert/34991210106>

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/ankix/5054843061> Gramming, Ann-Christin (2008), <https://www.flickr.com/photos/lukasch/169789753>