

You Are What You Buy: Postmodern Consumerism and the Construction of Self

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In our postmodern society, few things play the influential role in our lives consumerism does. Consumption is intimately tied to the creation and production of a sense of self. Few would argue that products are imbued with a greater significance than what their primary function may be. Today, it is virtually impossible to buy any product not embedded with certain symbols of identity acquired by the buyer knowingly or otherwise. Recognizing this, it is possible to draw the conclusion that consumption functions as a way to create a sense of self. However, this is merely the tip of the iceberg. The consumer may assume their consumption pattern sets them apart from the rest of society, marking them as an individual, but this is a fallacy. Consumption is one of our most creative and most restrictive practices. Due to this fact it must be concluded that consumer driven production of self is less to do with "who am I" and more with "who are we" or "with whom do I belong." There is no such thing as individualization no matter what we may think. Rather, consumption functions as way for the consumer to communicate with society at large where they fit within the social structure.

Jean Baudrillard claims that consumerism, or late capitalism, is an extension of his idea of the hyper real. In his way of thinking, everything in our daily world is a simulation of reality. The simulation is completed through the production and consumption of goods. Simon Malpas explains:

The circulation, purchase, sale, appropriation of differentiated goods and signs/objects today constitute our language, our code, the code by which the entire society communicates and converses. Such is the structure of consumption, its language, by comparison with which individual needs and pleasures are merely speech effects (Malpas 122).

Drawing on semiotics, Baudrillard uses the sign/signifier technique to explain consumption so that what we purchase is not just a product, but also a piece of a "language" that creates a sense of who we are. For Baudrillard, our purchases reflect our innermost desires so that consumption is caught up with our psychological production of self. Postmodern consumers can never be fulfilled because the products they consume are only "sham objects, or characteristic signs of happiness" and do not have any real power to bestow happiness to the possessor (Malapas 122). The empty, unhappy consumers have no choice but to consume more products with the hopes of finding fulfillment. This is the driving force

behind the capitalist machine.

Consumers are well aware of the unfulfilling nature of consumerism, but recognize that in our society it is the only possible way to live. This does not mean they take the topic lightly. British pop star Lily Allen is known for her blunt, zeitgeist ridden, no-holds-bar lyrics whether singing about cheating boyfriends or her own grandmother. In her song "The Fear," Allen takes on new ground by expressing an emotion that is common to consumers everywhere. While the majority of the lyrics express the singer's desire to be rich and famous, the chorus explains what compels her:

I'll look at the sun and I'll look in the mirror
I'm on the right track, yeah I'm on to a winner.
I don't know what's right and what's real anymore
And I don't know how I'm meant to feel anymore
And when do you think it will all become clear?
'Cause I'm being taking over by The Fear. (Allen)

While the lyrics seem simple, they are perhaps the most clear-cut example of Baudrillard's argument. The singer can no longer tell what reality is and is lost within the simulacra. In order to find some sense of self or purpose, she dives head first into more consumerism, only making matters worse. Just as Baudrillard predicted, consumerism is a self-propelling system of which there seems to be no way out. Or as Allen states at the end of the song: "I am a weapon of massive consumption/And it's not my fault, it's how I'm programmed to function" (Allen). It should be noted that "The Fear" articulates a sentiment felt by society at large. It is not only about who the singer wants to be, but who she wants the rest of the world to see her as. The expression of her wants or needs is indicative of the way in which consumerism plays on the notion of individualization through consumption.

Role of consumerism in our lives can be seen in a variety of ways. Federico Garcia Lorca's poem "Cry to Rome" vilifies consumerism. The poem focuses on the darkness that comes into society by consumerism's self-sustaining nature. He goes into great detail how consumerism has replaced God in society. Instead of aspiring for love and peace, we wish for products. This has not only polluted the environment, but the very nature of humanity. In lines 36-39 Garcia Lorca shows how the system of consumerism does not live up to its promises: "The schoolteachers show the children / marvelous light coming from the mountain; / but what arrives is a junction of sewers / where cholera's nymphs scream in the shadows" (Garcia Lorca lines 36-39). This section could symbolize the promise of fulfillment consumerism is to bring to the masses, or children. However, it only breeds disease. In his last four lines, Garcia Lorca continues with "because we demand our daily bread, / alder in bloom and perennially harvested tenderness, / because we demand that Earth's will be done, / that its fruits be offered to everyone" (Garcia Lorca lines 71-74). This statement clearly expresses the self-sustaining nature of consumerism. No matter how the public suffers, they

will continue to seek solace in consumption, which only begets more suffering and more consumption.

Whether individualization based on consumerism is a blessing or a curse, whether it means the final step to personal freedom or being set adrift from all that is solid, is not the point. The point is that fixity can no longer be assumed; personal relationships and connections to social groups are always contingent; and, individuals must now scan the world to decide with whom or what they wish to identify. Sociologist Michel Maffesoli's concept of "neo-tribalism" inspires this way of looking at consumerism. Neo-tribalism is the result of "a spirit of excess, of shared passions and rituals" as opposed to the characteristically modernist faith in individual agency (Bradford 227). Maffesoli goes on to say that the traditional values of "individualism, instrumental reason, the omnipotence of technique, and the 'everything is economics' no longer arouse the adherence of former times, and no longer function as the founding myths or as goals to be attained" (Bradford 227). Therefore in correspondence to Baudrillard's argument there is no individual, we find Maffesoli's conception of "being togetherness." Consumption has ceased to be about the individual and to now be about the collective.

We mark ourselves as members of a tribe by using a distinctive sense of style. This may be best understood in correspondence with Dick Hebdige's work with subcultures. According to Hebdige, subcultures function within the larger framework of society rather than opposed to it. Members of subcultures use the group's "style" to make a comment on the society around them while simultaneously taking part in society (Hebdige). Examples of this would be Goths, Rastafarians, Punks, and Skinheads. All of these examples are extremes. However, the notion of style signifying a specific group and/or place in society can be applied to every consumer. Fashion styles are described in terms of who the wearer is.

It is not uncommon for designers to remark that they make clothes for a specific type of girl. California Casual, American Classic, Urban Modern, Romantic, and Bohemian are all categories of the average women's style that supposedly say something about a woman's personality and where she falls in the social strata. Descriptions of these styles do not contain only the appearance of the clothing but also a synopsis of the "type of woman" who dresses this way. For example a woman categorized as American Classic is traditional, refined, minimal, ladylike, and in control. While these differentiations do not make up a subculture, they do make a category within the larger framework of consumption stating that women who fall within these categories all have a common link and therefore serve the same function as neo-tribes. Maffesoli points out style "is the postmodern form of the social link - a social link in a dotted outline, shaken by violent chaotic, unforeseen jolts" (Bradford 229). The dotted line is shaken by the fact that while style may represent a sense

of unity within the style/tribe it nonetheless is made up of overlapping points of view. It may be best then to see style not as unity but as a "cultural expression of an aesthetic vibration, however harmonious or discordant," invoking a meaningful resonance among disparate, even contradictory, social interests (Bradford 230). "Being togetherness" is the key concept of Maffesoli's argument. With this point of view, consumerism ceases to be the production of individual identity.

Perhaps one of the most liberating forms of consumerism is the concept of making a new "self." The process of consumerism makes it possible for a person to move from one area of society to another independent of circumstances of birth, gender, or race. Advertising offers the image of the transformed self; and consumption offers the means of effecting that transformation (Stromberg). One of the best examples of this relationship can be found in women's magazines. In a way these magazines constitute a sort of meta-advertisement, an advertisement for advertising. Consider this 1985 subscription-soliciting letter for the women's magazine *Glamour*: "If you'll give me just a few minutes of your time now, I honestly believe that I can help you change almost anything about yourself that you want to...Begin the great and continuing makeover of you" (Stromberg). Not only does *Glamour* promise to give you hours of idle entertainment; they provide the opportunity to create a new self. The promised opportunities for transformation are made more plausible, more desirable, and more necessary by articles that present various techniques of transformation: every page of the magazine, whether an advertising or an article, offers the reader a possibility of salvation and the means of attaining it. This is most evident in the form of the ever popular makeover.

The concept of the makeover to attain a new place in society is hardly a new one. One of the oldest examples can be found in "Cinderella," whose makeover transformation by the fairy godmother allowed her to become a princess. The difference in postmodernity is that it is not necessary to have magical assistance to accomplish this goal; simply purchasing the correct products will do the same thing. On shows such as TLC's *What Not to Wear*, experts transform fashion "victims" into a different version of themselves. This is a painful process for the "victim," as the identity created through their individual style is stripped away in favor of the "correct" one by following strict rules. However, by the end of the show, the transformed individual consistently claims that she has found the "real me" (Roberts). The correct style for the makeover candidate is chosen based on which neo-tribe they wish to join. A common phrase by the show's hosts is "this is not the outfit of a ___," which implies that the resulting makeover will not only change the "victim's" appearance, but also their circumstances in life.

Makeovers do not have to be as blatant as *What Not to Wear* and can be performed by an individual in order to transform themselves into the person they

want to be in society. The graphic novel Gemma Boverly presents multiple examples of the heroine's attempts at transformation for the purpose of reestablishing her social status. From the earliest accounts of Gemma's life, we learn she places attempts at transformation through consumerism at the top of her priorities. The most obvious and numerous examples include interior design. After moving in with her future husband, she wastes no time transforming their home into the type of place it should be, given its location and history. When they later move to France, she decorates their home in the French Rustic style as she desperately tries living the life of an authentic resident of the French countryside. Eventually she changes this, resulting with her affair with a younger man in order to correspond with her emotional needs of starting afresh. Each of Gemma's decorating programs corresponds with how she wishes the world to perceive her. When she and her husband first move to France, she does all her shopping at local shops, wanting to be seen as part of this society – to live as the French do. When at the bakery, Gemma exclaims how wonderful the French way of life is: "I mean, 25 different types of bread! God, the French are incredible! I mean, they just know how to love!" (Simmonds 33). Her enchantment wanes once she starts gaining weight from the amount of croissants she has eaten in her attempts to live a French lifestyle. This does not stop her from mocking other couples from England who have held onto their British lifestyle: "Wizzy brought one of her crappy 'Bundles from Britain'- Marmite, Weetabix, last week's Sunday Times" (Simmonds 43). Here we can see how shared consumer products constitute a social group – the British – within a consumer culture. Gemma's disgust for products of her own homeland illustrates her desire to separate herself from one neo-tribe and into another.

Consumerism is not only an economic system; it is the way our society functions. Products are symbolic and say much more than we may realize. While it is easy to conclude the consumption of products leads us to develop a sense of who we are as a person, it actually does much more than that. Consumerism helps us figure out where we fit within society and provides the means by which to change social circumstances. It is easy to disregard consumerism as shallow and devoid of meaning. Baudrillard's ideas on consumerism lead to a sense of loss, as there is no real identity, and no way of gaining fulfillment. However, if you choose to be a consumer and accept identity and social circumstance is a construction there is a sense of liberation. Consumerism hands us the tools to become whomever we want and lets us make the decision on how the world views us. By acknowledging we are not defined by what we own we can look consumerism in the eye and say "this is what I am because I chose it."

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