

Are the values of  
consumer society  
simply american  
values?



Consumerism is thriving in the world's economies today, it can be seen everywhere, in what we wear, watch or eat. Foods and clothes that are from other parts of the world yet so accessible locally. It is through the rise of globalisation in recent years that consumerism is now a major area of thought. Consumption in the economic sense is defined as a process through which resources are used up. In today's society as Mr Fromm points out "Contemporary man has unlimited hunger for more and more goods", (The Consumer Society Reader: Edited by Martyn J Lee )

Such a characteristic of consumer society is simply not down to American values, but the majority of today's society, the American culture does support many consumer values, but to say that one is simply based on the other would be irrational and too clear cut for reality. We are all consumers, from Bill Gates to the homeless on many streets, maybe to different degrees but the same principle applies. The propensity of many consumers today is so vast that it is safe to say nobody no matter how rich have everything they want. The world today evolves around the consumers rather than producers, as the extract below illustrates: " In modern world the production of consumption becomes more important than the consumption of production."

(The puzzle of Modern consumerism; Colin Campbell) This highlights what is the driving factor behind such huge rises in consumption, advertising. The force that compels consumers to want, through the media and other agents. It is this manipulation that makes the vast ocean of wants ever deeper. To produce something nowadays is not adequate for the sustainability of a business; it is the marketing that is becoming increasingly more important. A teacher once used the example of the Heineken Brewery which views itself

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as a marketing company, i. e. promoting its beer, rather than a beer production company. To produce consumption as well as production, thus highlighting the power that many major corporations have in the market by having sway over both sides.

Consumer values are as basic as form, function and meaning. These three things are the core values that are at the heart of consumerism. A person's reason for buying something can arise out of one or all of these motives. Either performing a function, in a suitable method or form, as well as having relevant meaning or sentimentality to the purchaser. One book uses the example of the front-loading washing machine, which has the same function as the top-loading machine, however the front-loading machines are simply not in the American culture, whilst the same is viable for the top loading machines in Europe. Such sentimentalities and traditions are more and more important to consumers nowadays; products are more and more geared to suiting the culture of regions and societies as well as individuals.

The above example highlights the power of the consumer in dictating what applies and what doesn't. This brings another value and that is of sovereignty, i. e. consumer sovereignty. There are debates to whether there is such thing with the increased power of global corporations and advertising, but nonetheless it is not viable for a product to be simply produced as in the time of Henry Ford's T-model, consumers must be satisfied. There are so many cars on the market with little variations that it is the image, which is conveyed, which will eventually make sales. Thus the increase in consumer research and other exercises that identify wants of the target market have increased.

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Other features of consumer behaviour nowadays are the increase in the importance of work and its rewards. More emphasis is put on earning incomes to buy products that are not needed, but portray a person's identity and wealth. With the increase in spending, food and clothing purchases have decreased in proportion of the total, with mounted importance on image and public perceptions making consumers very egotistical and self-absorbed.

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I read in the paper this weekend that Irish children are becoming more unruly and neglected because parents workloads are too much, and to make up for lost time simply adorn their child with gifts whether they have behaved well or not. Society now bears so much consumer values that the pressures are affecting family lives so additional income can be achieved. Products purchased nowadays must do more than carry out a function, or maybe not even do that at all, the product must say something about your personality, or position in society.

The Americans spearheaded such changes in society through the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century. This revolution was so-called the "revolution of rising expectations", why? With huge developments in technology, transport, and production methods more products produced, more employment, income, purchasing etc., thus people expected and wanted more. There were fewer obstacles to deny ones desires. Thus the birth of uncontrollable consumption we see today in vast parts of the world. However it is not simply that all consumer values are simply American. The

two are inextricably linked through the inherent presence of the market economy.

America is the quintessential market, which is dictated by the forces of demand and supply. In such a market the consumer is king and the only thing that speaks is money. With little government intervention there is a lot of interaction between companies and consumers. America ever since the American dream of the West has a culture of wants and wealth, desires and material goods. With the spread of globalisation, and freedom of trade such American merits are expanding throughout the globe because the US is such a major player on the world stage. This along with the dwindling of communism that does not have such selfless consumer values means that many American values have the autonomy to broaden.

Americans value such things as modern comforts and pleasures; there is little anxiety about environmental concerns, hence the culture of “big”, big egos, jobs, houses and of course pick-ups. All are connected with their public image. Work is very serious, and much socialising evolves around it, schedules are generally respected because in US “Time is money”, thus highlighting productivity and efficiency as important.

These features can be seen throughout the world, even in Ireland, O’Connell Street to be specific. For example, McDonalds typifies American, capitalism values. It is simple and quick transaction, clean and comfortable store, everything is rationalised and efficient, wages are low and profits huge. Marketing and advertising are critical and appealing to the culture of the country, In India for example, no meat in Big Macs. Such American

institutions that have spread around the world be they shops, or T. V programs exemplify American values and liked or not are now part of everyone's culture. (Consumer behaviour: James F Engel et al. p 624).

Consumer society and American values are so closely tied that it is sometimes hard to distinguish, but they are not simply the same. We all have values of a consumer, but not of an American. America is one of the largest market economies in an open, global market; therefore with consumers being the driving force behind capitalism American values are closely correlated. The consistent gains in free trade mean ever increasing American values and cultures are making their way to every corner of the world, thus affecting consumer behaviour. The underlying point is that we are all consumers, since man used the barter system and even before, food and clothes had to be exchanged and transferred. In recent times the culture of buying has rocketed with ever increasing wealth and wants, these have become all our values, not just American.

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