

Hyperconsumption, alienation, and false consciousness

[Life](#)



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In no other time and society has consumerism been more dominant as an ideology as in today's era of postmodern capitalism. Consumerism, or the "active ideology that the meaning of life is to be found in buying things and prepackaged experiences," (Bocock 50) defines the life of individuals and entire societies in many aspects to the extent that it has an entire culture based on consumption has been formed. In this consumerist culture, symbols, values, and even status are attached to commodities and individuals are measured based on their ability to buy or consume products. (Ritzer 210) In as much as consumerism and the culture that arises from it also sustains the life-blood of the capitalist mode of production, a marxist analysis of consumerism and the ensuing birth of hyperconsumerism, where individuals are driven into intense consumption patterns that are often unsustainable both for human health and the natural resources. (Freund & Martin 2)

From a marxist point of view, it can be argued that hyperconsumption as a phenomenon is a manifestation of the increased alienation of the masses from their labor. This alienation stems from the inability of majority of the masses to engage in activities that realizes their full human potential. Instead they are coerced by the prevailing system to work "as a means to satisfy needs that are external to [labor]" (Marx, 1844 as quoted in Woods & Grant 202) which entails that under the capitalist system human labour functions for the sake of capital accumulation of the ruling class. Human labour is thus equal to a commodity that is bought and subsequently owned by those who own the capital and other forces of production.

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It is therefore not surprising for the masses to be easily swayed by the media-mediated images of the “ good life.” Hence, majority are taught to believe in the fantasies that goods and commodities are advertised with. Bocoock (1993) notes for instance, how modern capitalism has increased the alienation of human beings from their own labor by making them believe that fulfillment lies from the consumption of commodities, in turn shaping the entire life cycle of humanity.

Thus the dreams and aspirations of individuals—their concepts of success and failure, for instance—have shifted rapidly to the consumption of goods and experiences hawked by advertisers. Marx himself had predicted that the time would come when even the things which humans thought to be beyond monetary value such as the concepts of love, honor, opinion, science, and conscience will “ become objects of exchange, of traffic, and can be disposed of...and at last enter into commerce.” (Marx 36)

At its worst, humanity’s alienation from labor also makes it vulnerable to the “ false consciousness” wherein the working class are convinced that they are able to lay claim to their labor or to gain satisfaction from it based on their power to consume or to buy. (Bocoock 51) Necessarily, the prevailing ideology is necessarily the ideology of the ruling class since those who own and control the means of production also own and control the means of the production of ideas. Therefore, the dominant consumerist ideology as an ideology of capitalism is a tool by which capitalism is sustained and strengthened. (Graham 68) Through hyperconsumerism, the working class is kept occupied by the illusions of grandeur and of new and revolutionary

products, which effectively neutralize their resistance to the exploitation of the system.

The impact of a culture that is based on mindless consumption can be no other than disastrous. The first casualty as patterns of mass production and mass consumption of goods rise steeply is the natural environment upon which the raw materials of goods and consumer products are extracted or derived from. (Freund & Martin 4) Already, critics have pointed to the steadily declining state of the world's natural resources as a result of heavy human activity. Finite sources such as oil and gas are fast dwindling due to increased fuel demands in industries.

In the same manner, the impact of hyperconsumerism on human beings themselves has been anything but beneficial. For instance, health experts have been calling attention to the alarming prevalence of obesity and a host of other health problems among both children and adults as a result of unhealthy fast food and lifestyles. According to a report from the New York Times, the unhealthy consumer values have managed to influence children who are exposed to television advertisements that target mainly children. These usually feature high-calorie and high-sugar food products that when consumed in large amounts which for a long time could affect the children's health adversely. (Pollan, 2007) Its author also emphasized the role of heavily-processed food currently dominating the market in the increase of obesity-related health problems among Americans.

All these point to the need to examine the lifestyles spawned by hyperconsumerist values and to critically analyse the relationship between alienation and consumerist attitudes and consumption patterns in order to

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gain a more comprehensive insight on the scope and nature of hyperconsumerism-related issues. What is clear at this point is that humanity sought to find the meaning to fill the void in their lives but was instead given with fantasies of consumer heaven.

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