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# Advertising Effects On Consumerism: The Ways To Avoid Manipulation

Since the moment we were born, our consumerist society has been making an enormous effort to convince us that we're not good enough simply by being the way we are. The advertising industry has made us believe that the only way to feel comfortable with ourselves is to buy products that are unnecessary luxuries, that we're convinced are necessities. Just look around and you will see billboards of models that none of us will ever look like, but we have to strive to do so by using sexuality and social status. There are advertisements everywhere trying to persuade us to buy stuff and have succeeded in doing so by. We must get out of the trap of consumerism and materialism, as it has societal and environmental consequences. Consumerism is closely related to intercultural communication because it has affected our culture and has forever changed the way society views each other.

If we feel unattractive, we can spend hundreds of dollars on makeup in hopes of attracting attention of others like a magnet. If we feel unimportant we can buy an expensive shiny car in an attempt to climb the social totem pole. Having fallen victims to manipulative advertising, most of us spend our hard earned money on products we can't even afford. We believe that by obtaining these items that we will achieve happiness and confidence. Little do we realize that no amount of products will ever quench our emotional thirst because what we truly crave for such as intimacy, connections, and creativity, cannot be bought.

In order to truly be aware of how consumerism has gotten to where it is today, we must know what it is and how it started. Consumerism can be understood as a theory that spending money and consuming goods is good for the economy. For most of history, people relatively owned very little. However, starting in the eighteenth century, economies in the countries of northwestern Europe began to expand and wages rose. People began to have more money than just the amount they needed to survive, and started shopping for small luxuries. As *Consumerism in World History* by Peter N Stearns states, "People in the Mediterranean cherished Chinese silks. The Roman Empire organized regular trips to India to pick up spices to please aristocratic palates. Arabs used African gold to make jewelry."

This created a cycle; the more people spent, the more businesses grew and the more wages rose. Countless industries were made in order to keep up with the demand for goods. Styles for clothes and hair which has previously gone unchanged for decades, now altered every year. Several value systems in the eighteenth century were hostile towards consumerism. Major religions pushed their followers to focus on other worldly goals and feared that these goods would distract from the true purposes of life (Stearns, 2006). In Britain, clergyman gave sermons against this new materialism that they called vanity, which was a sin. Eventually, shopping for pleasure was seen as a "great" way to make countries rich.

It's clear through the history of consumerism that the degradation of moral values was never taken into account. The sole purpose of mass producing goods that are necessary is for economic growth. Of course at the time it probably seemed like a solution to poverty as the demand for goods require more labor which meant more jobs. This is perhaps the only benefit of consumerism. People were always aware that these materialistic pleasures would only be a

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distraction from spiritual goals. In the early 1700s, a Dutch philosopher called Bernard Mandeville published a book called *The Fable of the Bees* where he argued that the only way to generate wealth was to ensure high demand for unnecessary goods. Mandeville implied the two choices you had: to be intellectually refined, spiritually intact, and dirt poor, or you can be a slave to luxury and materialistic goods and be wealthy; an ultimatum that the world still struggles with three centuries later.

Besides the fact that these unnecessary products only offer a temporary substitute of what we really long for, we fail to realize the impact our consumer behavior has on the environment. In the article "As Consumerism Spreads, Earth Suffers, Study Says" by Hillary Maywell, it states that in the United States there are more cars on the road than licensed drivers, which increases pollution and use of fossil fuels. The consumption of highly processed food has led to a worldwide epidemic of obesity. As much as we are manipulated into believing that we need these products, ironically they are causing our planet and health to deteriorate as well as making us spend more time away from things that truly matter such as family. The more time we spend working to get money to afford these products, the longer amount of time we spent communicating and creating connections with others.

In another article "Consumerism and Environment: Does Consumption Behaviour Affect Environmental Quality?" by Carlo Orecchia and Pietro Zoppoli states that consumption can affect the environment in many ways: large amounts of consumption equal larger inputs of energy and material and generate larger quantities of waste by products. Our ecological footprint can also be thought of as our environmental impact, is measured by our consumption behaviors. "Every good, process or service requires energy and material to be produced, consumed and waste disposed" (Orecchia & Zoppoli, 2007). The more we consume, the more we also throw away. Most of our garbage cannot be recycled so it just goes to landfills. Although we take up only 8% of the population, North Americans account for 50% of the garbage all around the world (Brummet, 2004).

In a study called "Environmental Impact Assessment of Household Consumption" by Diana Ivanova, shows that the stuff we consume is responsible for up to 60 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions and between 50 and 80 percent of total land, material, and water use. These products and services would not be produced if it were not for so much demand for it. What we should be concerned with is the increase of demand for natural resources such as gas that are unsustainable and try to minimize depletion and pollution as much as possible.

Not only is consumerism harming our planet, it has harmed our cultural values as well. The consequences of consumerism can alter our quality of life. There has been a drastic materialistic shift in our society. We are now suddenly defined by the clothes we wear or the car we drive. Everything nowadays revolves around economic profit. Children from an early age are encouraged to go to school so that one day they can get a job that makes a lot of money. We need to make more and more money to be able to satisfy our consumer "needs". The average card holder with debt owes an average of \$5,100 according to the 2010 US Census. Although in today's society we can afford a lot more than our grandparents, we aren't any happier. According to the article "Consumerism and its discontents" by Tori DeAngelis, it states that "In simple terms, a strong consumerist bent--what William Wordsworth in 1807 called 'getting and spending'--can promote unhappiness because it takes time away from the things that can nurture happiness, including relationships with family and friends, research shows." The research in this article shows that the unhappiest people were those who reported high

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materialistic values.

Nowadays, young adults that have grown up with so much possessions have a greater risk of depression and other social disorders. We are convinced to purchase products through means of advertising. The encouraging of consumerism through means of advertising goes a lot deeper than just trying to get us buy to things. The goal of these ads is of course to make the company money, but as a society we mentally compare ourselves to these ads and see them as a way that we should act like or look like. These ads sell us values and images of who we should strive to be. Gender roles are largely exploited by consumerism for profit. One can examine anorexia (a disorder common in women) as a case study for how consumerism may reinforce being skinny as an important culture value. These physical traits come to represent attractiveness and anything less is seen as ugly and shameful.

In the documentary *Killing Us Softly 4* featuring Jean Kilbourne, shows shocking patterns in ads about what it means to be a woman in American culture. Advertising tells women that what's most important is how they look, and ads surround us with the image of ideal female beauty. However, this flawlessness cannot be achieved; it's a look that's been created through mostly photoshop. The more insecure these companies make women, the more money they make. Consumerism doesn't directly cause this type of objectification of women, but it encourages it, it makes others feel like it's okay to view women in this manner. In Kilbourne's powerful statement, "Ads create an environment. Just as it's difficult to be healthy in a toxic physical environment, if we're breathing poisoned air or drinking polluted water, it's difficult to be healthy in a 'toxic cultural environment' that surrounds us with unhealthy images and constantly sacrifices our health and well-being for the sake of profit" shows how consumerism has shaped the values this country has today.

For the purpose of this paper, I analyzed myself and tried to figure what it is that I constantly spend money on that does not benefit me at all. Ultimately, nothing I buy can truly make me happy, but most of the things I do purchase make me feel confident. I think I do a fairly good job at informing myself on clothing brands so that I don't contribute to these companies that have sweat shops in third world countries. Something that I realize I hate spending money on is waxing. It causes me nothing but pain and gives me no confidence, it's just something that I feel like I have to do as a woman. Since I was a young teenager I was exposed to the media that convinced me that women had to be hairless. It didn't help that one time I was made fun of for having hair on my hands. Ever since I got my first job, I have been getting my body waxed. For this paper, I went over my credit card statements for the past year and calculated that I spent about \$572 on just waxing services. This was truly shocking to me, that I've paid this much just to get rid of hair that will always come back! After doing my research on consumerism, I don't plan on letting it make me feel insecure about myself anymore.

I offer a couple of ways to not be manipulated by consumer messages: try to limit your exposure to media outlets and focus more , if you believe you are materialistic try to understand what causes you to be that way. We also have to be more aware of what we are consuming and that companies don't really care about our wellbeing, they just want to maximize their profits. I don't believe materialistic things themselves are bad, they do create a sense of individualism and being able to express yourself, it's just that you have to find balance. You have to know what you need and what you don't. You can treat yourself to things you believe you deserve, as long as you don't achieve it at the expense of things that really matter like your relationships with yourself, your family, and your community.

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