

I Am What I Consume: The Role Consumption Plays in my Life

Jessica Pierson

Abstract

Thinking critically about consumption in our capitalist society can be a daunting task. The structure of market economy is designed to manipulate consumers by tapping into their desires, creating a materialistic mindset driven by commodity fetishism. Via marketing and peer pressure, consumers are indoctrinated to purchase products and consume information under the illusion of agency in their decisions. This capitalist societal structure produces conforming consumers. To redefine oneself as a critical consumer, one must reflect not only on ethical considerations surrounding the products and information consumed, but also on the power relations tied up in said products and information. Part of this reflection process includes identifying the symbolic meanings attached to products consumed, as well as how these products contribute to one's self-identity and construction of self. The narrative to move from conforming consumer to critical consumer reads "What I consume shapes me" to "I consume to shape myself".

Keywords: Critical consumer, conforming consumer, Marxism, capitalism, alienated labour, commodity-sign, reification, hegemony

CRITICAL CONSUMER

“Mom, where does spaghetti meat come from?” I asked, as I slurped a noodle into my mouth, splashing tomato sauce onto my chubby cheeks. My mom paused for a moment, seemingly contemplating how much of reality she should expose to her four-year-old daughter. I already knew chicken nuggets were made from real chickens, and fish sticks were made from the same fish my dad and I caught in the bay. I had an awareness that “meat” meant it came from an animal. Smiling at my messy face, my mom responded, “It’s called beef. It comes from a cow”. Swallowing a mouthful of sauce-covered beef, I pictured the field full of brown cows that we passed on the road on the way to the beach. A pang of guilt traveled through my little body, as I pictured the big animals chewing on hay, minding their own business. Did they know they would end up on my plate?

My childhood experiences of living in a relatively small, farming community set the stage for critical thought about the food products I was consuming. As a child, I had a grasp on the association between the animals I saw on the farms and the food on my plate. I learned later in life that children who grew up in the city had a high level of disassociation between animal food products and the animals themselves. Robert Dale Parker, an English Professor and accomplished author, defines this disassociation as alienation. He explains that in the pre-capitalist era, people produced their own goods, and “...saw the process through from beginning to end and could see and take pride in the completed product without feeling alienated from their own labour” (232). In Marxist terms, these products had use value. However, in modern day capitalism, workers don’t produce their own goods. In contrast, workers are alienated from their labor, producing commodities (objects for sale) containing exchange value (Parker 233).

Alienation of labour transfers to consumption as well. Not only are we alienated from the products we produce, but we are also alienated from the products we consume. We produce commodities that we don't consume, and we consume commodities that we don't produce. Although I was alienated from the meat products I was eating, in terms of not producing what I was consuming, the level of alienation was reduced due to exposure and education from my parents. However, it was later in life that I became a true critical consumer of animal food products.

As an adult, I began butchering my own meat, and later opened my own butcher shop. In doing so, I was exposed to the capitalism that encompasses the meat industry, from farming practices to meat processing and retail sales. I was no longer alienated from my own labour, as I used the products I produced. As Parker states, I began to "...take pride in the completed product without feeling alienated from [my] own labor" (232). According to Marx, this meant that the products I was producing and consuming had use value to me (Parker 233). However, as a retailer of these products, I also became part of the capitalist machine, as I became the producer of goods that possessed exchange value, and consumers of my products were alienated from the labour to produce these products (Parker 233). Nonetheless, my customers experienced a similar level of reduced alienation to the meat they were purchasing from me as I experienced as a child - they knew where the meat was coming from, and who was processing it (me).

As a small business owner, I was competing with the corporate meat industry and navigating the power relations regarding both the production and consumption of meat. I took pride in the fact that I knew where the products I sold came from. I spoke directly with farmers and attended their farms to witness their farming practices and ensure the animals were being

treated with respect. I also provided retail meat with no fillers, colourants, or additives. However, the corporate meat retailers were able to offer more competitive prices due to their relatively less-ethical processing practices. To my surprise, consumers paid more attention to the cost of meat than they did to the ethical practices and overall quality of the product.

Why did consumers buy their meat from Superstore or Walmart, rather than from my small butcher shop? Parker argues, "...instead of choosing to buy and consume, people have the drive to buy and consume imposed on them, culturally...even when they buy a mass-produced product that they have been made to want via marketing and peer pressure" (237). Customers bought their mass-produced meat from corporate superstores because our society has been indoctrinated to think these superstores provide more practical and economical options than a small butcher shop. Consumers aren't considering ethical farming practices and animal welfare, nor are they thinking about the quality of the product. Rather, they are swayed by marketing tactics and brand ambassadoring.

These conforming consumers did not intentionally support the corporatization of our food supply and sustainability by choosing to buy their meat products from monopolies and large corporations. They didn't realize that by their choice, they were exacerbating the class divide between the upper and middle/lower class - helping the rich get richer and preventing me, a working-class equal, from making a living. Gramsci explains this consumer ignorance as the maintenance of hegemony through cultural leadership (In Parker 236). On this notion, Parker states, "The bourgeois capitalists' cultural prestige makes their way of thinking seem like common sense to the masses, and so the masses come to identify with bourgeois ways of thinking, leading them to consent to bourgeois dominance" (237). The masses, therefore, support

a capitalist system that works against their interests, thinking they are exercising relative autonomy in their choices. However, through marketing and peer pressure, consumers are being swayed to buy mass-produced products, all the while thinking they are using a “common sense” approach, and choosing what they want as individuals.

CONFORMING CONSUMER

I am my phone; my phone is me

Mindless scrolling, endless, thoughtless

Information bombards me- visuals, words, sounds

Soaking into my unconscious mind

Determining my worldviews

Echo chambers, confirmation biases

Are my opinions even my own?

Do I consume information, or does it consume me?

I see what I want to see

Or do I?

Algorithms determine my life

AI defines me

Who am I without my iPhone?

My life exists in the virtual

My smile shines in social media

My pillow tear-stained

A version of me is what they see

But do they know me?

Grocery lists, voice notes, pictures

Bank accounts, step counts, period tracking

My phone is an extension of me

Merging with my device, I become a thing

The world around me fades

Reality obscured in the virtual

The escape engulfs me

I am my phone

My phone is me

My relationship with my iPhone is twofold: I am a consumer of both the physical product, as well as the information found therewithin. Mike Featherstone, Professor of Sociology and author of *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, refers to these types of consumption as relating to the primary production sector and the tertiary production sector of information (the secondary sector being travel and consumer's capital equipment) (17). In reference to the primary production sector, I became a consumer of my iPhone when I purchased the device. An acute action, this purchase situated me as an iPhone user, although the actual consumption only occurred once. However, in respect to the tertiary production sector of information, I am a continual consumer. The physical product, my iPhone, is a gateway to information that I consume on a relatively consistent basis.

What is the meaning behind my iPhone purchase? What does this item represent in my life? According to Baudrillard, "...consumption entails the active manipulation of signs. This

becomes central to late capitalist society where sign and commodity have come together to produce the ‘commodity-sign’” (In Featherstone 15). Featherstone builds on Baudrillard’s notion of the commodity-sign, indicating a movement from a “...materialist emphasis to a cultural emphasis” (15), further stating, “Hence the consumer society becomes essentially cultural...” (15). Bradford S. Hadaway, Philosophy Professor and author of *Consumerism and Self-Construction*, parallels this notion, arguing, “Much of the success of consumerism has been built on the manipulation of the symbolic meanings of the things people own...Modern consumers consume meaning along with the physical commodities...” (2). Therefore, material products, such as my iPhone, have semiologic value ingrained in their exchange value. I not only consumed the iPhone as a product when I purchased it, but I also consumed the meaning this product carries with it. As such, I am a continual consumer of the ‘commodity-sign’ associated with my iPhone.

My iPhone represents a sense of togetherness and community with fellow iPhone users, as well as a differentiation between myself and users of cellular products that differ from mine. In addition to these symbolic meanings, my iPhone may be a status symbol, indicating a lifestyle choice and class system that I am assumed to be a part of. Hadaway describes commodity-signs as products that “...contribute to the individual’s self-understanding while also successfully signaling to others messages which increase recognition...by differentiating the individual from others and sometimes offering points of connection with others (10). Featherstone matches this idea, asserting “...the symbolic associations of goods may be utilized and renegotiated to emphasize differences in lifestyle which demarcate social relationships” (16). Considering the

descriptions of commodity-signs in relation to my iPhone, how does this product situate me within my society, and how does it contribute to my self-identity?

I would like to claim that I have thought critically about the role my iPhone plays in my life, both as a material product and as a vehicle for information, as well as a conduit for my self-identity. However, that is not the case. I blindly followed the masses when I purchased my first iPhone many years ago. Bombarded with media messaging that the iPhone was the best cell phone on the market, I put very little thought into the purchase. More than a decade later, my iPhone is such an important part of my life that it has become an extension of me. I navigate effortlessly through the familiar tabs, store my life data into various folders, pay for goods using Apple Pay, and communicate via iMessage and Facetime. In addition to my real-life information being stored in my device, my social media accounts are just a click away. Nonetheless, I do not exercise any conscious thought while using my iPhone. It comes with me wherever I go, like an item of clothing. Whether in my back pocket or in my purse, on my bedside table or beside me on the couch, my iPhone's presence in my physical existence is incessant. The unfortunate and unexpected reality is, I am a conforming consumer of the most important product in my life.

Aside from the lack of conscious thought regarding the purchase and use of my iPhone, as well as the societal symbolic meaning it carries that identifies my social status, my iPhone also contributes to my self-understanding on an unconscious level. Hadaway describes consumption as a "...crucial vehicle of self-construction", using the phrase "I will buy to shape who I am" (4). He elaborates on self-construction through consumerism, explaining the difficulties and complications that arise when attempting to construct oneself in consumer culture. Hadaway affirms, "There will always be pressures to construct selves unreflectively and

without authenticity...In addition, the objects themselves become part of an extended self” (10). This “extended self” is what Marx defines as reification. Parker explains “...reification refers to the way that commodification reduces social relations, ideas, and even people to things, thus intensifying alienation...we might see reification when people merge with their phones to the point that they shut out the world around them” (235). As a conforming consumer, my iPhone has become an extension of myself. I have unintentionally and unreflectively merged my physical reality with my iPhone in almost every aspect.

Not only have I neglected to reflect on how my identity is shaped by my iPhone, but I also use the device mindlessly. I’m a conforming consumer of the information I access on my iPhone. I don’t consider the marketing pressures and advertising that bombard me while I consume information, nor do I consider how algorithms contribute to what type of information I consume. There are times my consumption is mindless, as I scroll through media that has been chosen for me via algorithms. There is the illusion that I choose what I read or listen to, but in reality, that choice is made for me via marketing and peer pressure.

Although consumerism can be an important vehicle for self-construction through reflectivity and self-governing agency, it can also contribute to one’s identity unconsciously and negatively. We all have the choice whether to reflect upon our individual selves in the world of consumerism, or to engage mindlessly with it. Hadaway indicates that constructing the self in the marketplace can be liberating (10). However, he also admits that self-creation within the mode of consumerism is likely to fail (Hadaway 1). In order to transform from a conforming consumer to a critical consumer of my iPhone and the information found therewithin, I would need to either challenge the process of reification and rediscover my agency by disconnecting from the material

object as well as from the virtual information it holds, or use the product and information in a knowledgeable and reflective manner. Now that I am aware of the capacity for my consumption to shape my identity of self and my perception to and of others, I have the power to reinvent myself as a critical consumer.

CONCLUSION

Thinking critically about consumption in our capitalist society can be a daunting task. The structure of market economy is designed to manipulate consumers by tapping into their desires, creating a materialistic mindset driven by commodity fetishism. Via marketing and peer pressure, consumers are indoctrinated to purchase products and consume information under the illusion of agency in their decisions. This capitalist societal structure produces conforming consumers. To redefine oneself as a critical consumer, one must reflect not only on ethical considerations surrounding the products and information consumed, but also on the power relations tied up in said products and information. Part of this reflection process includes identifying the symbolic meanings attached to products consumed, as well as how these products contribute to one's self-identity and construction of self. The narrative to move from conforming consumer to critical consumer reads "What I consume shapes me" to "I consume to shape myself".

Works Cited

Featherstone, Mike. *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, SAGE Publications, Limited, 2007.

Hadaway, Bradford S. "Consumerism and Self-Construction." *Multifaceted Explorations of Consumer Culture and Its Impact on Individuals and Society*, edited by David J. Burns, IGI Global, 2019, pp. 1-21.

Parker, Robert Dale. *How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies*, 4th ed., Oxford University Press, 2020.

Jessica Pierson is a MAIS student, with a double focus area of Cultural Studies and Literary Studies. She resides in Banff, where she is progressing her music career. A singer/songwriter, Jessica Performs her original music at various venues. Her research combines secondary data with narrative, adding reflection and a personal touch to her research papers and presentations. She is currently completing her final project for her degree, which consists of writing a compilation of short narratives, woven together with the overarching theme of music, presented in book format. Jessica's writing is inspired by music, nature, yoga, and personal relationships.
